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BEAUTIFUL MAMMA

AND OTHER STORIES



By WINIFRED GRAHAM

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BEAUTIFUL MAMMA

AND OTHER STORIES.





"A proud and happy little girl drove through London in the twilight."

BEAUTIFUL MAMMA
AND
OTHER STORIES

BY

WINIFRED GRAHAM

WITH TWENTY-SIX ILLUSTRATIONS

LONDON
GEORGE NEWNES, LIMITED
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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
"BEAUTIFUL MAMMA"	I
HIDDEN IN CHINA	19
DORIS	43
A LABOUR OF LOVE	63
BLACK CHARLOTTA	85
BLARNEY	101
THE LADY WHO SMILES	123
FALLEN AMONGST THIEVES	129
THE HAUNTED YEWS	153
THE BROWN SPRITE.	173
A HEROINE IN BIB AND TUCKER	189
THE FAIRY WITH THE GREY BEARD	207
THERE WERE GIANTS IN THOSE DAYS	229

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

	PAGE
A PROUD AND HAPPY LITTLE GIRL DROVE THROUGH LONDON IN THE TWILIGHT	<i>Frontispiece</i>
"I WISH WE HUNG OUR WASHING OUT," SAID TINY	5
"I THINK," SHE CONFESSED, "I LOVED YOU A LITTLE MORE"	13
AUNT HANNAH SAID: "THERE IS CERTAINLY A THOUSAND POUNDS LOCKED UP IN THOSE PLATES"	23
HE GAZED IN ABSOLUTE BEWILDERMENT AT THE DELICATE FIGURE	27
HE PICKED HER UP IN HIS STRONG ARMS	33
"I THOUGHT HENRI WAS KILLED!" SHE CRIED	45
"IT'S DREADFULLY HARD TO BE BRAVE, PUSSY"	53
A SAD LOOK CAME INTO THE GIRL'S EYES	57
A VERY PRETTY WOMAN BENT DOWN TO KISS A PAIR OF ROSY- CHEEKED BOYS	65
"I SHOULD BE SURE TO HAVE TWO HELPINGS, AND PERHAPS THREE," ANSWERED ROY, STUBBORNLY	69
MARIA GREETED THE BROWN APPARITION WITH A SCREAM OF DISMAY	75

	PAGE
"ALFRED," SHE GASPED, "OH! ALFRED, JUST LOOK AT POMPEY"	79
IT IS TOO LATE TO MAKE AMENDS NOW	97
KENNETH PRODUCED A TIN MONEY-BOX	109
THE YOUNG GENTLEMAN HAS GONE CLEAN DAFT	115
A GATE HAD BEEN ADOPTED BY ERIC AS A SWING	131
ERIC SKIPPED UP THE STAIRS, AND VANISHED INTO THE LION'S DEN	137
"YOU WON'T GET A MAG FOR SUPPER IF YOU DON'T BRING ME SOME MONEY"	143
THEY MADE A PRETTY PICTURE	157
A SMALL HAND GRASPED HER ARM	165
"PERHAPS THERE IS A FAIRY IN THAT GARDEN"	213
A TALL GIRL STOOD BEFORE A MIRROR	217
THE TWO SMALL FIGURES REMAINED IN LONG AND EARNEST CONVERSATION	235
"IT WAS REALLY RATHER CRUEL OF YOU TO WANT TO KILL ME".	245
SOMEBODY OPENED THE GARDEN GATE	249

BEAUTIFUL MAMMA



TALL, handsome woman, elaborately gowned, swept down a marble staircase with stately tread.

"We shall be late," she said, glancing at the clock.

Her husband helped her into an opera-cloak of crushed strawberry velvet and ermine. She threw him a little smile of thanks. He was the good-looking, useful acces-

B

sory to her household, an establishment made luxurious by her wealth. The husband, by no means an idle man, worked hard that he might not be entirely dependent on his wife's fortune.

"Have you been upstairs to kiss Tiny?" he asked, ready to excuse Isobel's unpunctuality as he thought of the very kissable little person in a blue and white bed on the top floor.

"No, I hadn't a moment to spare; she won't expect me."

Mrs. Alfred Guest preceded her husband into the carriage. She was so busy gathering up her trailing draperies she did not look at the nursery window above.

There a wistful little face—pressed like a rosebud against the glass—watched the brougham, with its pair of dashing horses, whirl away into the darkness.

"Good-night, my beautiful mamma," said an unheard voice, while unseen lips and fingers blew the neglected kiss through iron bars.

"Poor mamma, how busy she is!" said Tiny to herself; "it must be hard work for her living in London and going out so much."

The small person crept back to bed, with a sigh.

"I needn't have kept awake, but I thought perhaps she would come."

The words had no bitterness in them for "beautiful mamma."

The usual pile of letters awaited Mr. and Mrs. Guest on their return.

Isobel sank yawning into a seat and scanned the hand-writings.

"One from father," she announced. "I wonder if it's anything disagreeable! He has been very cantankerous lately. Don't you think it is rather awful—to feel I am entirely at his mercy, that the £3,000 a year he allows me is only a gift, which he could withdraw at any moment? I've a nasty presentiment about this letter—see, my hand trembles—guilty conscience, perhaps. I hate being scolded. Open it for me, Alfred," handing him the envelope. "Father is the only person in the world I am afraid of."

Her husband broke the seal. She leant back and closed her eyes. He read in silence, then he came behind her and stroked the soft brown hair gently.

"You were right," he said, "it is bad news. How did you know?"

She started up.

"I didn't know; give me the letter," snatching it from his hand.

Only the sound of her heavy breathing and the quick turning of the sheets broke the intense silence.

"Cruel!" she exclaimed, crushing the paper upon which her passionate tears fell.

Alfred took her in his arms.

"Don't mind, dearest," he whispered; "I'll work for you; I'm making £500 a year—we can live on that. Let us show a brave face; money isn't everything, you know."

"But what have I done to be punished like this?" she asked. "He calls me 'an extravagant worldling,' he accuses me of living an idle, selfish, godless life—he—he wants me to taste poverty, my own father—think of it, Alfred, and tell me, is it not cruel?"

"Yes," he said, "I think it is cruel. He should have brought you up differently: you must explain this to him. You will go to-morrow, of course?"

She shook her head, making a sudden resolve.

"No, I am too proud to beg. If he likes to treat me so unjustly, I must bear it. In time he may relent, stung by my silent reproach. He thinks I shall be on my knees. All these years, and he does not really know me! I have made up my mind, we must live on your £500 a year, and try the other side of life. We can but do our best to be plucky! Here's my hand on it, Alfred; I feel quite brave now—I won't cry any more."

She looked her husband straight in the eyes with a flickering smile which brought a lump to his throat.

"You're a brick, Isobel!" he said.

* * * * *

Tiny was talking over the garden-wall—a small, narrow garden, built on exactly the same pattern as many others in the row, just four brick walls, with a summer-house of inexpensive make, a lawn, a path, and one flower-bed.

Tiny had scrambled on the top of the summer-house to inspect more closely a florid girl, with red arms, who



“ ‘ I wish we hung our washing out,’ said Tiny.”

was hanging out some fluttering garments on a clothes-line.

"I wish we hung our washing out," said Tiny, her eyes kindling with appreciation; "it's such fun when the wind makes the things all fat. I just love living here and being able to talk over the wall. The last place we were at was very slow."

"It does one good to see your happy face," answered the florid girl, as she pegged up a striped petticoat.

"I wasn't nearly so happy in Berkeley Square; you see, poor mamma had such a lot to do, she couldn't find time to be with me."

"Was she housekeeper to some of them swells?" asked the voice in the next garden.

Tiny looked puzzled at the question, then continued her innocent information.

"She looked after our own house. I had to put on my white silk dress every afternoon at five, and keep ever so clean—it was such a nuisance! It doesn't matter here, because visitors don't come. Mamma is taking me to London to-day for my birthday treat; last year I had a big party, but this time we are going to the Zoo instead."

The florid girl watched the childish figure slide nimbly back to the grass.

"Seems they've come down in the world," she said to herself, "and the little 'un's awful pleased."

Tiny, with flushed face wreathed in smiles, started with "beautiful mamma" on her first pleasure excursion since

migrating to the suburbs. It was a day of wild joy and untold delights.

"We may go in the lovely open part of the train?" said Tiny, watching with satisfaction the procuring of pink tickets. She felt sure the pink tickets were far superior to white, because the compartment was so airy and the passengers could be seen in the next two or three carriages. A gentleman with a banjo favoured them by playing "Home, Sweet Home," and collected coppers at the finish. The novelty charmed Tiny—she kept telling mamma how charming it all was.

"You know," she said, as they drove gaily along on the top of an omnibus, "our brougham always seemed just like a prison to me."

"Did it?" queried Mrs. Guest. "I wonder why!"

There was a strange note in her voice. She wiped the corner of her eye, declaring a tiresome fly made it water.

"Well, one felt so shut in and lonely. I daresay you noticed it yourself. I've been wondering why everything is so much nicer now—why you stay at home with me in that dear little house, and don't bother to put on grand dresses. Do tell me, mamma."

"It is grandpapa's doing," replied Mrs. Guest, and her fingers tightened over the little hand she held in her own.

"Dear grandpapa! He was always so kind," murmured Tiny.

"Yes—he—he used to be kind to you. He liked you because you were not frightened of him."

Mrs. Guest spoke quickly, and, fearing further questioning, changed the subject. Why spoil Tiny's happiness by souring her trustful, childish mind? Why let her suspect the heartache, the soreness, that rankled under every smile?

The long day proved one of weariness to Mrs. Guest ; she came home thoroughly tired. Tiny looked as fresh as when they started, and wished they could go again to-morrow.

"I've been thinking over these jolly times being all grandpapa's doing," she said. "I should like to write him a letter, mamma, to thank him very, very much."

Mrs. Guest caught the child to her heart. The strain of the long day, and the fatigue of struggling to appear cheerful before Tiny, proved too much for the nerve-weary woman. These simple words, spoken so earnestly, broke down her fortitude, opening the flood-gate of her tears.

"Don't, Tiny ; don't say such things, darling. I can't bear it ; I can't, indeed ! Thank him when I am so miserable ? Oh ! child, if you only knew !" Tiny gazed at her, astonished and bewildered.

"Mamma," she pleaded, "please, please don't cry !" putting her handkerchief to Mrs. Guest's eyes, the same little handkerchief crumby from cake which had been lavishly bestowed upon the elephant and bear. "Mummy, darling, I want to comfort you ; what *can* I do ? I thought you loved this place too. Grandpapa can't know you don't like it ; poor grandpapa, to think of his

making such a mistake, and it hasn't pleased you, after all. He would be so sorry if he knew. Dearest, let us go back to Berkeley Square, I really won't mind very much."

"We can't go back, not without grandpapa's consent, so don't think of it any more. I was a little tired, that's all. My head aches. You must go to bed, and not worry about it. I shall be all right in the morning."

The child went sadly and silently upstairs. The joy of the past day vanished. The mystery of sorrow was working for the first time in her young life. It came as a great shock, the knowledge that "beautiful mamma" was not happy.

"If I told grandpapa," she said to herself, "he would alter it all."

The thought brought a selfish little pang. Here, in this small red house, she was never lonely. Mamma stayed so much at home, it seemed hard to have to go back to the nursery on the top floor and the little prison on wheels. But the selfish thought only stayed a moment, for Tiny remembered mamma's tears, and felt she could never expect grandpapa to forgive her if she did not speak.

"I must certainly go and see him, but I'll write a letter first," she said.

Tiny fetched a sheet of paper and wrote in her big round hand:—

"DEAR GRANDPUPA,—Please I want to come and see

you. Please send a servant for me, we have only to, and they are always busy.

“Your loving grandchild,

“TINY.”

She borrowed a stamp from cook, and posted the letter without telling “beautiful mamma.”

“It’s to be a surprise!” she said.

The following day, when Mrs. Guest was out marketing, a landau with a maid in it arrived for Miss Tiny.

The little girl nodded confidentially to cook, and told her in an undertone that the big carriage had come in answer to her letter; it would be all right about the stamp. As Tiny drove away she saw the florid girl in the garden next door watching her open-mouthed. Tiny turned back and waved violently. The florid girl appeared too astonished to return the civility, and a moment later the dashing grey horses were out of sight.

A beetle-browed old man sat alone by his study fire. His square jaw told of obstinacy; the one soft spot in his nature was for children. He had spoilt his only daughter Isobel, and then resented her consequent frivolity. He considered as a wife and mother she neglected her duties, and saw in the bread of poverty a remedy against worldliness. There was a ring of confidence in Tiny’s little letter which he could not resist; now he awaited her somewhat uneasily. It was possible Isobel had poisoned the child’s mind against him. What if he missed the old loving assurance? What

if she treated him with a show of baby scorn and infantile disdain? The mere idea seemed to wither the old man as he watched the door and nervously stirred the fire, which crackled and hissed cheerfully. At last a step outside warned him his visitor had arrived.

"I wish to see no one but Miss Tiny," he told the footman, and the little pattering feet along the passage were unmistakable.

As she ran towards him with outstretched arms all doubts vanished. The same warm kiss met his lips, the fervent hug, the glowing smile, told their own story.

"It was such a long drive—all the way to London," she said, as she scrambled on his knee. "I thought it would never end; and then I got the fidgets. Do please unfasten my shoe for me, the pins and needles are playing with my toes!"

The beetle-browed old gentleman with the fierce moustache and determined jaw wrestled with the shoelace, which became so hopelessly knotted that Tiny grew impatient, declaring it did not matter, as the pins and needles had run away.

"How do you like your new house?" asked her grandfather, casually. "I suppose it's rather small?"

He longed to hear the details of their life, but feared to manifest a deep concern.

"Yes," said Tiny, "a dear little place; *you* would like it, I know, and I *love* it!"

"That's lucky."

"I thought mamma was just as happy until yesterday. She laughed and smiled and played games with me, for



“ ‘I think,’ she confessed, ‘I loved you a little more.’ ”

there is room to run about in the garden at the back. She said it was grandpapa's doing, and I wanted to come and thank you, but all in a moment I found out about your mistake. She could not keep it secret any longer, because she got a headache with mending my stockings and making the beds before we started for the Zoo. We get up so much earlier than we used to in London."

"My mistake! How do you mean?"

"Why, she does not like being there at all, that's the trouble of it! You wanted to be so kind to her, to give us all a great treat, and really mamma wasn't enjoying herself a bit. She just pretended because I was so happy, but now I know, you see, I sha'n't enjoy it any more, so I want to take 'beautiful mamma' back to Berkeley Square. It was lovely of you to plan it, and I'm afraid you'll be ever so disappointed, but please try not to mind very much."

Tiny stroked his cheek consolingly with her soft little fingers. The thought of leaving the red villa made her very sad, but she stifled her own wishes with an effort. It was a sacrifice made gladly for one she loved.

The old man sat staring at the flickering flames with eyes dilated and lips slightly apart.

"Did you only find this out yesterday?" he asked, at last.

Tiny nodded.

"You never heard a word of complaint before or saw your mother crying? You thought she was happy like yourself?"

"Of course I did."

"And you loved me just the same?"

Tiny hesitated, her cheeks grew pink. "I think," she confessed, "I loved you a little more—that was because I felt so much obliged to you."

"Your father—did he seem happy too?"

"I think so, but he stayed working late at the office; I was always in bed when he came home. I only saw him in the mornings, then he was eating his breakfast so fast to catch a train we hadn't any time to talk."

"I see, it must be very bad for his digestion."

"No, I don't think so. The food we eat now is very plain; we sent our old cook away. The new cook is much nicer, she allows me to go in the kitchen and help her make puddings. She lent me the stamp on that letter I sent you. I did not want mamma to see it, because I knew she would not like you to be disappointed after meaning to be so kind. Shall you mind arranging for us to go back to the big house very much?"

Tiny spoke with deep concern. Her clear blue eyes, fixed on the sphinx-like features of the old man, seemed looking him through and through. He reddened to the roots of his grey hair, and then his head bent low over Tiny's curls, so that she could no longer see his face.

"Grandpapa, are you asleep?" she asked.

He started.

"No, no; I was only thinking. Will you be my postman and take a letter back safely to mamma? Mind, it will be a very important letter to trust to such a little girl as you."

"I'll hold it tight in my hand all the way," she replied, as he put her gently down and drew his chair to a big oak desk. Tiny leant against his knee as he wrote. The feeling of the little form resting so securely against him sent a wave of emotion over the stern old man. His letter consisted of but one sentence:—

"Tiny tells me I have made a mistake!"

"Is that all?" she asked. "It looks such a very little letter; and where's the beginning and the ending?"

"Don't be in a hurry, Puss—there is something more to come." He opened a narrow blue book and tore out a sheet, upon which he wrote Isobel's name and some figures which Tiny could not read.

"Why are you crossing it out?" asked the small voice at his elbow.

"That is in case you lose my letter—a cheque has to be made safe. I daresay you are the first little girl of your age who has ever been intrusted with £3,000."

"It sounds a lot of money," said Tiny.

"Yes. Money is a great power; it makes and mars lives. You are too young yet to understand, but tell mamma that is her allowance to the end of this short year. On New Year's Day she shall hear from me again. But I will come and see her at the little house to-morrow and sample a dinner by the new cook who lets you help with the puddings. Pray don't forget to pay her that stamp, for I'm very pleased you wrote. It was so clever of you to find out my mistake."

He patted Tiny on the head.

"Are you satisfied, little woman?" he asked, as he handed her the letter.

"Oh, yes, because mamma will like it, and I'm glad, of course, for her."

But as Tiny spoke she thought of the happy days now gone for ever, of the pink railway tickets, and the bounding omnibus, of a small garden overlooking quaint, inflated garments swinging in the breeze, of the countless joys she would taste no more.

As if to convince herself she repeated again, in a quavering undertone :

"I am glad, so glad, for my beautiful mamma."

HIDDEN IN CHINA.

CHAPTER I.

UP and down, up and down ; what was the sound ? Up and down—yes, footsteps in the room above, somebody pacing to and fro in the weary watches of the night. Enid rubbed her eyes ; she thought at first she had been dreaming. Who was sleeping overhead ? Why, Billy, of course.

She stifled a big yawn and tumbled out of bed. It seemed quite natural that she should run to him, the big cousin, who loved her as a little sister, alternately teasing and petting.

Billy was not restless for nothing. Billy must be in pain or trouble, and, with her woman's instinct, the child (only half understanding her impetuous desire to soothe suffering) answered the promptings of her heart.

Her bare feet pattered noiselessly along the corridor. Ghosts materialized in every shadow, or fears of ghosts, which filled the darkness with terror.

Oh ! how heavily the stillness hung upon the air ! No sound broke the mysterious silence save her quick breathing.

At last she reached the door and pushed it softly open—standing in a streak of moonlight, a quaint, white figure, gazing at Billy with large, questioning blue eyes—a shower of fair curls framing the small face, scarcely less grave than his own.

For a moment she made no remark—she just stared wistfully at him, and he stared back at her, dimly conscious she guessed something of his trouble.

“I heard you walking,” she said; “I listened ever so hard, for I thought at first it must be Aunt Hannah going upstairs to bed. Then I remembered she had been in to kiss me, and so I just crept out, you see. Billy, dear, has anyone been scolding you, or is it a great big bother about money again?”

Billy nodded. Somehow this quiet sympathizer soothed his nerves and did him good. It was what he wanted. He could speak out his trouble to Enid, and she would be sorry, though she could scarcely understand. He let her crawl on his knee and snuggle into his arms, as he sat in his shirt-sleeves by the window, with her fluffy head pillowed on his shoulder.

She murmured “money” in a worried whisper, with her wide eyes raised to his, and her forehead puckered. The word set him thinking again.

“It’s like this,” he said, speaking his thoughts aloud. “If I can’t lay my hands on a thousand pounds, I’m done! I suppose you hardly know what that sum means, eh, little woman? There! don’t look so sad—what does it matter to you? I deserve all I get! I’ve

been reckless, I didn't care ; but to-night when I told my mother—when I saw her face——”

He shuddered and turned away his head. Enid felt the fingers on her shoulder tighten involuntarily—she touched his cheek with her lips, but he was barely conscious of the kiss.

“Is it true,” she asked him, “that, when I am grown up, I shall be very rich? Nurse often tells me about it, but Aunt Hannah won't let me talk of money, she seems to think it's wrong. Nurse says this big house and everything in it belongs to me, and the land too, for miles and miles. Surely I've got a thousand pounds. Please take it, Billy, dear ; I don't want it a bit, I really—really don't.”

He smiled at the generous offer.

“You're a kind little soul,” he said, “but your money is no good to me. To begin with, you can't touch it till you come of age. No—I must think of some better plan—I must try and borrow it, though Heaven knows from whom.”

Again he knitted his brow, and the hard, strained look came in his eyes.

“Was Aunt Hannah very unhappy?” queried Enid. “She seemed so pleased when you wrote you were coming to-night ; she gets tired of being here alone with me ; she is always talking of you and wanting you to come ; she liked the friend you brought ; she liked him so much for being a lord. I suppose lords are different to other people—much nicer, I mean.”

"Ah! Gaisford is a good chap; I meant to ask him for the money, but somehow I could not, the words stuck in my throat. Poor mother! how willingly she would give me her last farthing—but I've drained her dry. The game's up, and I must face the worst. You'll think of me sometimes, Mite, if I go away to a foreign country, and you'll be loving and good to the mater; remember, she will want all your love; she has been too lenient to me, she spoilt me when I was young. If father had lived it might have been different."

His voice broke, he put the child down almost roughly, and pushed her from him.

"Run back to bed; I've said more than I ought—but I don't believe you'll repeat—you are such a staunch little body. What's that I see—a tear? No, Mite, you must not cry, I am not worth your tears; besides, you know tears are such silly things, they don't do anybody any good."

He patted her on the head. She walked slowly away, her little brain busy, her heart swelling with a great desire.

A thousand pounds! What had she heard only yesterday to make the words sound so familiar? Somebody had mentioned that very sum in her hearing. She tried to link the threads of memory together. Instead of returning to her room she paused on the wide, oak staircase, thinking—thinking!

Yes, it was coming back—the scene of yesterday. Aunt Hannah had been entertaining a friend to tea, a



“Aunt Hannah said : ‘There is certainly a thousand pounds locked up in those plates.’”



lady in a black bonnet who knelt down before a cabinet in which a set of china plates grouped themselves stiffly. The lady had put on her spectacles and peered into the cabinet, then Aunt Hannah said: "There is certainly a thousand pounds locked up in those plates." The words re-echoed clearly now in Enid's memory, and a sudden determination to find the money locked away in that innocent-looking ware took possession of her.

"Everything in the house belongs to me," she told herself, "and so the cabinet is mine to do as I please with."

It was an intoxicating idea—to find the money, and take it straight to Billy, the money which was actually in the drawing-room!

Her pulses thrilled, the blood danced through her veins. The spell of adventure was upon her with its magic glow. She held her breath in anticipation.

No longer did she creep nervously along the moonlit passage; now she ran dauntlessly down the broad staircase, swift as an arrow from a bow.

She knew where to find matches in the hall, and, lighting a candle, made a triumphal entry into the big, old-world room, as if defying the malignant spirits which doubtless lurked in the heavy curtains or behind the tapestry screen. It was a room of curiosities, for Enid's mother had been a great collector, but the strange ornaments and their value were never explained to the child.

Enid went straight to the cabinet before which the black-bonneted lady had knelt, and, placing the candle on the floor, counted the plates through the glass.

"Oh! dear," she sighed, "the door won't open, and I shall never be able to find the key. I must smash the glass, I suppose, and break the plates afterwards. It's a lot of work for one night, but it must be done. I wonder if all the money is in one plate alone, or scattered about, and whether they open by a trick. But I expect I had better break them—it seems the quickest and easiest way of finding what is locked inside."

She managed to shatter the glass by aid of the poker, and force her hand in between the jagged edges. She drew out the nearest plate and examined it carefully, shaking it violently, and listening. Nothing rattled inside. Then, standing up, she flung it to the ground, with a clatter, against the twisted leg of a quaint oak chair. As she bent eagerly forward to gather up the pieces a step behind her filled Enid with sudden fear. She hardly dared turn, conscious though she was of a living presence at her side. She let the scraps of china fall, stifling a cry.

"What are you doing?" asked an astonished voice.

Enid looked round, to find a tall figure bending over her, in a long, blue dressing-gown.

"Oh, I am so glad it is only you," she gasped, "because you are good, and won't tell. I'm rather busy getting a thousand pounds."

Lord Gaisford's jaw dropped; he gazed in absolute bewilderment at the delicate figure of this small, fair child, with the earnest eyes and sensitive mouth. He noticed her feet were bare, and she stood unheedingly



"He gazed in absolute bewilderment at the delicate figure."

amongst the broken glass, her little pink toes peeping from under the long, white night-gown, which gave her a ghostly appearance in the gloom.

"I—I thought there were burglars in the house," he stammered, by way of apologizing for his intrusion, "so I just ran down to see. I heard the glass break, and as I came in you dropped this plate. I say," picking up the bits, "what a thousand pities."

He was an enthusiast over china, collected it himself, and recognised at once the value.

"Never mind the thousand pities," said Enid, resorting to business, "I want the thousand pounds. Perhaps, now you are awake and down, you wouldn't mind helping me. It is very important for Billy, you know. If he doesn't get the money, he's done. Now, I have heard there is certainly a thousand pounds locked up in these plates, and I am just going on breaking them until I find it! You might begin the opposite end: we will see which gets it first. I feel more comfortable with you here; it was dreadfully lonely before. You must be careful not to cut your hand—I broke the glass very badly. See, my wrist, it's bleeding."

Lord Gaisford fumbled for a handkerchief, and, finding one in the deep pocket of his dressing-gown, bound it carefully round the injured wrist, with almost feminine tenderness.

It took a good deal to astonish Lord Gaisford, and this little scene upon which he chanced to alight did surprise him considerably. He was not usually taken

with children, but the fairy-like atom with her slim body and big eyes fascinated him oddly.

He might have laughed at her ignorance had not the pathos of the mission struck him. Her care for Billy, her eager striving after the impossible, the sad havoc she was working, and the simple request that he should help her.

Very gently, and with a scrupulous regard for the childish feelings, he explained to Enid her mistake.

"You see," he said, tugging at his moustache, as he looked down at the inquiring face, "it was merely a figure of speech. The china could be sold for a thousand; that is its market value! If you had broken the plates you would have lost the money, instead of finding it as you supposed. A very natural mistake—just an error of judgment," he added, hastily, seeing a deep crimson flush steal over the delicate skin. She was struggling not to cry, but, despite her efforts, one big tear would come and roll down her cheek slowly, a tear which she wiped away with the corner of Lord Gaisford's handkerchief, made fast round her wrist.

He began to feel desperate. He wanted to say he would give her the money, that some day she could repay him, but, for the first time in his life, Lord Gaisford felt confused—almost shy.

He was conscious of a little cold hand slipped into his, and a broken voice whispered:—

"Do you think you could sell it for me, then? I don't know how one sells things, and I'm afraid I might

be stopped. Perhaps if you packed it in your portmanteau and took it to London, Aunt Hannah might not notice it had gone for a day or two. She doesn't sit in this room when she is alone."

He smiled at the naïve suggestion, picturing his valet secreting the plates amongst the clothes to be packed for London the following morning.

"I very much doubt," he said, "if you have a right to any of your belongings, my dear, till you are grown up—till you come of age. At present it is all in the hands of your guardians. They might object to the china being sold. I would willingly buy it myself—for I am supposed to be a judge, and to tell you the truth, it is a bargain. These things increase in price every year; originally they probably cost half their present value."

"Oh! What am I to do?" sighed Enid, pushing her hair off her forehead, and leaning wearily against the tall figure of the man; "it is all very difficult—isn't it, Lord Gaisford? I hoped you might be able to make it right, because you're a lord."

"And why did you think that?" he asked, smoothing the tumbled curls. "What put such an idea into your little head?"

"Lords are better and cleverer than other people," she replied, confidently. "When I'm grown up I'm going to marry a lord."

She informed him so innocently of the fact that he almost broke into a laugh—but remembering the unconventional hour, and the strange incidents of this meeting,

he controlled the desire. The thought of Enid's aunt suddenly appearing in night attire, to question him, paralyzed the visitor; or, worse still, an army of frightened maidservants, equipped with pokers. "Caution must not be lightly laid aside," he told himself, and glanced nervously round the silent room.

"I've got an idea," he said. "How would it be if I gave you a cheque for the amount now, and in return you were to sign a paper saying the china is to be mine—when you come of age?"

Enid danced round delightedly, three little skips and a jump, with her bare feet on the thick carpet.

"Then Billy won't have to go away. Billy will be quite happy!" she gasped, her cheeks glowing, her eyes sparkling, her lips parted in ecstatic smiles.

"No, Billy can turn over a new leaf and reform, if the humour seizes him. And, by Jove! he ought, with such a little trump for a cousin. When do you want the cheque? What! Now, at once? Won't it do in the morning?"

Enid shook her head.

"Poor Billy can't sleep."

That was argument enough.

"Come along, then. I'll write it up in my room, and you can take it to him straight away. I say, where are your shoes? You will be getting pins in your feet. Shall I carry you?"

"I forgot about the pins, and I didn't think of shoes."

He picked her up in his strong arms as if she were a



"He picked her up in his strong arms."

doll, and Enid put her little hands round his neck confidently, conscious that her troubles were over.

Through the silent hall they passed, and up the broad oak staircase—an odd couple to have been doing a deal for a thousand pounds in the dead of the night.

He opened his door softly and put her down in a big arm-chair. Then he unlocked a case and drew out a long blue book, which he laid on the writing-table.

Enid wriggled out of the chair and ran to his side. She watched him write the cheque and fold it into an envelope, with eyes so bright and eager they looked like twinkling stars.

"Shall I address it?" he asked.

"Please. Just write 'Billy.'"

"Perhaps it had better be in your hand," said Lord Gaisford. "Can you write?"

She nodded.

"You see," he added, "I don't call your cousin by his pet name. He keeps 'Billy' for home use."

Enid perched herself on Lord Gaisford's knee and wrote the five letters in a big, childish hand.

"That isn't a bad 'B,'" she said, proudly. "I sometimes send Billy a letter, so I've got used to writing his name. Now there is the other paper to do, the paper for you to keep about the china. What must I say?"

"Anything you like," he answered, smilingly.

She took a large sheet of paper, and, after thinking a moment, made out the following document:—

"I promise to give Lord—(how do you spell Gaisford?)

—Lord Gaisford a thawsand pounds of plats when I am 21.—ENID DREW."

"Thank you," he said, gravely; "I shall keep this very carefully."

"You have been so kind," she murmured, putting up her face to kiss him.

"Have I? Well, perhaps some day—who knows?—you will be kind to me. Will you remember to-night, I wonder, when you are grown up, and will your eyes be as blue as they are now and your cheeks as pink? There—there—little girl. I must not keep you up any longer; you are tired, no doubt, but you will sleep all the better for our talk. Run with the letter to Billy, and then scamper off to bed as fast as you can, and—oh! I say, look out for the pins."

She sped away, grasping her precious envelope in both hands.

Billy had just fallen into his first troubled sleep. Exhaustion at last crept over him, and the weary brain, worn out by thought and worry, came gradually under the influence of a Heaven-sent drowsiness. He never heard the little messenger come into his room till a hand touched his shoulder and a voice said:—

"Wake up, Billy; wake up! I've got something for you. It's the thousand pounds. I went to look for it. Oh! Billy, do wake up."

In a moment he sprang half out of bed, feeling about wildly in the darkness. An envelope was forced into his hands, and with a ripple of laughter Enid darted away, and swung the door to behind her.

He rubbed his eyes, wondering if it were a dream, as he struck a light, regarding with astonishment the envelope with "Billy" on it in Enid's childish fist.

"Then it was Mite," he said. "She must be crazy!"

Nevertheless he opened her envelope.

CHAPTER II.

LORD GAISFORD was in London. Not over fond of the season, he had only come for a short visit to his little house in Park Lane, with its church-like door and mullioned windows, near the Piccadilly end.

He was hurriedly answering some long-neglected letters, when his servant brought in a large wooden box.

"What's that, Symons?" he asked, hardly looking up.

"I think it's china, my lord."

"But I am not expecting any," turning to the case with sudden curiosity. "Why, it's years since I've bought a bit of china; my collection has been shamefully neglected."

"Perhaps this is a present, my lord," said Symons, solemnly. "The lady asked me to open the box and see that none of the plates were broken. They have come up from the country, and she seemed rather afraid——"

"A lady—plates—china," the words broke from Lord Gaisford disjointedly. "Do you mean to say she is here?"

He hurried to the window and looked out. At his

door stood a carriage and pair, and in it a slight, girlish figure, wonderfully delicate and fragile.

Without another word he left Symons to his task of unfastening the box and hurried downstairs. A moment later the girl in the carriage had turned at the sound of a familiar voice.

"Why, Miss Drew—what a scolding you deserve!"

She gave him her hand, with a smile, and the blue eyes twinkled.

"Nonsense," she said. "I did not know you were in town, or, I am impolite enough to say, I shouldn't have come. I wanted you to find those historic plates ranged in rows upon your return. They make me feel horribly old! Fancy! I am twenty-one to-day!"

"Is it possible? You look barely seventeen."

"Oh! fair people get an advantage." She laughed, showing a row of tiny, pearl-like teeth.

"Look here," he said, "I want you to come in for a few minutes; I can't argue in the road, and it is all humbug about those plates. You ought to have known I never meant to take them."

He put out his hand to help her to alight, but she drew back.

"Aunt Hannah would have a fit. You don't know what a particular chaperon she is!"

"Quite right, too; but it's different with me. I have known you since you were a mite of a girl. I carried you in my arms; in fact, I'm a sort of grandfather to you."

She looked at the handsome, well-set-up man of thirty-eight.

"All right, grandfather," she said, "if you'll vouch for the propriety," and sprang to the pavement.

They passed into the house together, still talking and laughing.

"I don't want to quarrel," he said, "but I am not going to let you leave without those wretched plates. No—no, I won't call them wretched, since they started our friendship, which has been kept up in a straggling way for quite a span of years."

"Yes, it did straggle rather," said Enid, sinking into a comfortable chair, and looking like a rose in bud. "Every now and again you came to Derry Park, and made some ribald jest when I pointed to your china. But I never forgot your goodness to me that night, and every birthday I used to look at the cabinet and say: 'One year nearer.' Then I went to school abroad, and that seemed to separate us. I wrote to you sometimes."

"Once—only once—I have the letter still. It was when you read I had been nearly killed out hunting. Your aunt sent you an extract from the paper."

"Well," argued Enid, "if I went to school abroad and obliterated myself, you started off for a yachting tour round the world just as I was coming out. Aunt Hannah would not have me presented till I was nineteen, so I began my social career rather late in the day."

"And how have you enjoyed it, may I ask? Lots of admirers, I suppose! I saw you in a lady's paper as a 'type of English beauty.'"

"Oh! I have had a good time, of course, and dear Billy has looked after me splendidly; just like a brother.

It is perfectly true he reformed ever since that time you so generously helped him. He steadied down and slipped into a good business almost directly. We often wondered how that was. He got recommended anonymously. It was always my private opinion you had a finger in that pie. Do tell me ; am I right ?”

“You are too sharp,” laughed Lord Gaisford ; “but let us return to the china. Symons is still unpacking the box, I expect, and he will have all his trouble for nothing.”

“Indeed, he won’t,” cried Enid, jumping up and running to the door, “for I’m off !”

Lord Gaisford caught her as she passed.

“Stay,” he said, and his whole face changed, “I can’t let you go like this. I want to ask you a question : you who are so quick at guessing things, has it ever struck you why I remained unmarried all these years ?”

“No, I did not think about it, I was so used to your being single. I never pictured you with a wife. I can’t imagine anyone I should consider good enough.”

“Then I suppose you never traced the secret’s clue to a little girl with blue eyes and flaxen curls, who was hunting a thousand pounds on a night long ago ? You did not realize that I was waiting for the tiny creature I carried upstairs, a child who instinctively confided in me, and seemed to love me—because I chose to help her. She was such a small, sweet thing, she kissed me of her own accord, and she was so unselfish. Her sorrow was all for another, and her joy too. Now she has come back

to me as she promised, with her 'thawsand pounds' worth of plats.' I have the scrap of writing still. It would not have been Enid to forget."

His arms were round her now, and she nestled into them, just as she had done long years ago, for somehow it seemed her natural resting-place.

He kissed her long and tenderly. So soft, young, and fair, he was half afraid of crushing the rose-leaf.

"The plates shall be between us," she whispered, shyly.
"I don't think I'll bother to take them away."

DORIS.

CHAPTER I.

EXCITED shouts from the road mingled with the screams of a terrified woman. Little Doris rushed to her mother's room, white and frightened.

"There's a lovely carriage outside and two big horses on the pavement, and every thing is in a heap!" she cried. "The horses ran away straight into a dust-cart, the lady and little boy were thrown right against our area railings——"

Mrs. Stephens caught Doris in her arms. Doris at least was safe, for the moment nothing else mattered. Then she remembered the lady and the little boy, and ran quickly downstairs.

It all seemed like a dream to Doris. Event followed event with extraordinary rapidity. At first she had been idly watching the street from a dingy window, then came the novelty of a carriage and pair in that unfashionable locality, and Doris began to weave stories about the elegant dark woman and the boy at her side.

Before the story had time to form itself definitely, the horses had taken great fright, and the disaster occurred.

Now this same lady, with her dainty clothes torn and mud-besmeared, was sobbing hysterically in the in-artistic front parlour which Mrs. Stephens called her drawing-room. "I thought Henri was killed!" she cried, clasping her son to her heart. "He is my only treasure!"

The treasure wriggled free, and showed Doris a bruise on his arm. He looked a thorough English boy, though his mother spoke with a French accent. Mrs. Stephens ministered to their comfort with tactful sympathy, and gradually the hysterical lady became calm and reassured.

"You have been very good to me," she said, looking at the pale tragic face of her unknown hostess. "I fear we have given you much trouble, for you are not well yourself."

Mrs. Stephens forced a smile. "You are very observant, Madame," she said.

"Ah!" sighed the stranger. "I read faces. It was my profession before I married. I am a clairvoyante. I see that you are ill, too ill ever to recover—am I not right?"

Mrs. Stephens bowed her head.

"Behind your illness there is some trouble—of another kind. I should say your married life was unhappy."

Mrs. Stephens' eyes wandered to the children in the window. The sun shone upon Doris, making her hair like gold, and her face as the face of an angel.



" ' I thought Henri was killed ! ' she cried."

"If I have lost my husband's love, at least—there is still my child."

She half whispered the words, for from Doris she had tried to conceal her husband's fatal tendency to drink, and the ravages of her own incurable disease. The child was the one healthy plant—beautiful, sweet, unspotted—under a roof where selfish vice and long-suffering sorrow joined hands.

"Yes," said the stranger, "I have never seen a lovelier child."

As she spoke she fixed her bright eyes on Doris, and something in their expression struck sudden unaccountable fear into Mrs. Stephens' soul. She felt as if this woman, smothered with the evidences of wealth, envied her the little daughter whose beauty was the one jewel the poorer woman had left to treasure and adorn her life. The boy, Henri, had no pretensions to good looks, though his plain face was redeemed by a merry smile.

"Yes," murmured Madame, "a lovely child, and as sweet as she is lovely, no doubt."

"Yes, indeed! Doris would do anything in the world for me," replied Mrs. Stephens warmly.

"I have always longed for a daughter, but it is not the will of *le bon Dieu* to so bless me. Boys are different, they go to school, to college, and are lost to us."

A silence fell; only the sound of the children's prattle broke that long and ominous pause.

"My husband is American," said the low foreign voice at last, still in a whisper. "I have sent a messenger to

him to come at once. I hope you do not mind our staying here. My coachman has his leg broken, and is being attended at the police station opposite. The inspector asked me so many questions, I was bewildered. I rushed to this house for shelter. I beg you will let me remain?"

Mrs. Stephens willingly assented, and with her own hands brought in tea. Though poor, and hampered by cruel circumstances, it was impossible to mistake her for anything but a lady.

Doris, still wondering at the glistening rings and extravagant attire of their unknown guest, crept softly to her side, and looked up at her with a pair of wide, blue eyes.

"What are you thinking, little angel?" asked Madame.

"I was just hoping," replied Doris, "that your beautiful carriage would mend again, or will you have to throw it away?"

Madame laughed.

"Like a broken doll! No, no, *chérie*, some clever person will put it all together very nicely."

"I'm so glad for you," said Doris softly, "I don't think you could walk very far with such a long tail to your dress. Mother never wears long tails like that."

"She is charming!" murmured Madame in Mrs. Stephens' ear. "My husband is an amateur artist. I know he will want to paint your little girl. But unfortunately we are leaving England next week, and returning to New York. My married name is 'Kelly.' I was

Mademoiselle de Lancy, a well-known fortune-teller. Now I have the fortune myself, and more money than I can spend, but money will not buy me an adorable little girl, will it?—will it?" The strange insinuating tone, the half-halting repetition, and chiefly the expression of Madame's eyes, sent the mother's blood cold.

"I don't know what you mean," she said, stonily.

A moment later she felt the touch of a magnetic hand upon her wrist. The strong personality of the clairvoyante seemed overpowering her.

"Your daughter will grow up beautiful. What are you going to do for her? You are ill yourself, your husband is not kind—what has little Doris to look forward to? With me she would be in a proper setting, with a brilliant future stretching before her. With me—as her mother—she could some day find the world at her feet! If it were possible to come to a satisfactory arrangement, would you be justified in denying all this to your child? When I take an idea into my head, I must speak, that is my nature. I do not beat about the bush!"

Mrs. Stephens sat like one stunned. Her lips parted as if by a sudden cry of pain, but no sound came. Her eyes, widely opened, seemed looking—on—on—into the far beyond. Then she leant back dizzily, with her head hanging limply on the hard wood of the chair.

Madame rose, and caught her in her arms.

"Run quickly for some water, Doris," she said. "Your mother has fainted."

CHAPTER II.

"MAMMA dear, where have you been to-day? You look so tired!" said Doris, dragging a big chair forward, into which Mrs. Stephens sank gratefully. "Yes," continued the childish voice, "you look quite white, like the table-cloth, just as white as the day you fainted. Please, if you can help it possibly, don't faint again this afternoon. I thought my heart was going to jump right out on the floor, and the little boy said: 'She's dead,' and I said: 'She isn't'—and oh! I wanted to knock him hard for saying anything so dreadful. He was sorry afterwards; so, of course, I forgave him. One must always forgive people."

Doris sighed at this conclusion. "Always forgive," echoed her mother,—"of course, yes. I saw Henri this afternoon, his father calls him 'Harry.' They live in a great house overlooking Hyde Park, and soon they are going on the sea to America. You have never been on the sea, Doris, and they want to take you with them. Madame has bought you a big French doll, with a bed, a perambulator and portmanteau of its own. You will be very happy, won't you?"

Mrs. Stephens spoke cheerfully, she was not looking at the child.

Doris put up her hands, and caught her breath with a little gasp. A sudden intuition of what this journey meant came like a flash of revelation to the infantile soul.

"She will take me away for always from you?" The words came quickly. Mrs. Stephens never moved a muscle. "God will see to that, Doris. We must only think of the present, and what is best for us all."

Doris scrambled to her mother's knee, and buried her face on the thin wasted shoulder.

"I love you. I can't leave you. I love you, and I don't care how many dolls with perambulators are going on the sea."

She clung to Mrs. Stephens in a frenzy of fear. The awful agony of separation stabbed her young courage and laid it low. The whole world meant "Mother,"—in that one word lay the child's complete universe.

It seemed that no power on earth could drag her away, now that she had fast hold of her mother's neck, and the little hands tightened, half-strangling the fragile woman, who sat apparently unmoved, white, stony, and calm.

"Doris," she said, when she could find her voice, "if you really loved me, you would like to do something to please me. *I want you to go!*"

The words came with force and decision, there was a pleading look in the woman's eyes, as if imploring mercy.

The words sank deeply into the mind of the sensitive child. "*I want you to go!*" How cruel!—how terrible!—how hopelessly final!

Against such words there could be no argument. Doris struggled with her tears, as the small face worked

convulsively. Gradually the fingers clutching Mrs. Stephens' shabby gown loosened their hold.

"You want it,—to—to—make you happy——"

"To make me happy."

"You would rather I went away?"

"Yes."

Doris slipped off her mother's knee, standing for a moment irresolute, as if unable still to believe her ears.

"To make you happy," she repeated. "I see."

Never before had her mother demanded a sacrifice ; hitherto the hard places were smoothed for Doris, and love found ways to hide pain and sorrow from those innocent blue eyes.

Doris walked slowly through the open door, and out into the little yard at the back of the house. Here she stood with her face turned up to the sky, and her gaze fixed upon the wild clouds—driven by strong winds.

She felt like one of the clouds,—they had to go just where the wind blew them, and she would be blown away—far across the sea.

She struggled to keep back her¹ tears. What had she done that mother no longer needed her? Why could it be that everything had altered,—all in so short a time? Something soft and living rubbed against her foot. She bent down to stroke a black and white cat, an old and valued friend. "Your kittens have all gone," she said. "Mother gave them away, but they did not mind! Now mother is going to give me away, and I mind, oh! so much. I'd just like to lie down and die.



“ ‘ It’s dreadfully hard to be brave, pussy.’ ”

If it wasn't to make her happy I'd cry and cry till she promised to keep me always. It's dreadfully hard to be brave, Pussy, when things like this happen. Somehow I never expected anything of the sort, but perhaps your kittens did not expect it either. I wish I had never been born!" The cat stood on its hind legs and rubbed a furry cheek against Doris' tumbled curls, bent low over her dumb friend.

"I'll take you to bed with me to-night," she said. "I may get lonely and dream I am on the sea. When I hear you purring I shall know I am still at home. If father had wanted me to go, I could have quite understood, but mother always said she loved me." Perplexity mingled with her sadness of heart as she carried the black cat upstairs.

"Its ever so difficult to be brave," she whispered in the velvety ear. "I feel sure I shall cry, but I don't mean to let mother see. It might spoil her happiness, and that would be a pity. You know Pussy I mustn't mind about its hurting so much, because *she wants* me to go!"

CHAPTER III.

YEARS had drifted down the even course of time, but in the dim distance, like a black spot upon her life, Doris remembered the days of silent suffering which followed her departure from home and parents. Gradually, in new scenes, surrounded by kindness and

adulation, the "little angel" as she was called, regained her flagging spirits. She thought less often of the pale woman she had loved, and grew to rely upon fresh influences. When, two years later, they told her Mrs. Stephens was dead, it seemed as if all the pain and horror had been borne long ago, the childish heart having then fully endured its fair share of human emotion.

So Doris grew up conscious of a love she believed to have been slighted, for her mother parted from her without shedding a tear.

To the last Mrs. Stephens played on the good feelings of the tiny martyr, had actually feigned joy, when first they saw the great vessel which meant such a long good-bye.

"I wonder," said Henry Kelly, "how it is you have such intense sympathy with children."

He was a tall, intelligent-looking young man, much improved in appearance since childhood, and spoke to a girl with sunny hair, and the bluest eyes the world had ever seen.

"I know how intensely they feel—just when people least suspect they suffer. I remember myself as a child, it seems like another person altogether, a little life which belonged to somebody else. When my mother gave me to your mother—it was like crossing over the edge of the world into space, nothing mattered, I felt dazed, paralysed, numb! Now I am one of the happiest girls alive!" She slipped her hand into his.



"A sad look came into the girl's eyes."

"I'm so excited about my coming of age party to-morrow," she continued. "People will be very surprised when my engagement is announced as an extra attraction, and to lend an air of romance to the proceedings. We have always been looked upon as brother and sister, I don't believe anyone ever guessed we were in love."

"Don't make too sure, I believe we have been like that confiding animal, the ostrich!"

Doris laughed.

"I don't care!" she said, "I daresay they will pretend to be surprised, which will do just as well. People expand when an engagement is first made known, they say delightful things and all the wishes seem like blessings in one big shower!"

"Doris," he whispered, "my mother tells me she has a little packet on your twenty-first birthday, something that came for you, when your own mother died. I asked that you might have it to-night, I thought it would make you sad to-morrow. She has just put it in your room."

A sad look came to the girl's eyes.

"I loved my mother dearly," she said, "but I suppose I was a tiresome child, and she was glad to be rid of me. I fell into good hands, I ought to be very grateful to Providence, and I am!"

With lover's kisses on her lips, Doris went singing to her room.

The fresh beauty of her face was like an opening rose. The moon made the night as light as day, she sat by her window, holding between her hands a paper parcel,

sealed and addressed. The writing brought the past back suddenly, as if the long gap had never been. The spirit of the child returned, she was once more little Doris, with the aching heart and throbbing pulses.

From the torn string and broken seals, a worn and faded diary, like a voice from the dead, appeared to speak its pitiful story of human sacrifice, and mental pain.

The mother whom Doris half suspected of hardness, rose now to justify herself from her long interval of silence. The short extracts written in a hurried, tortured handwriting, gave the simple picture of Doris as a child, Doris loved more dearly than words could tell, Doris, the idol of a woman who had lost hope. As Doris read, her eyes grew hot and sightless with unshed tears, tears that gathered and scalded beneath her lids. Every pulse quickened as she realized the heroism lying beneath the calm exterior of the woman who had given up—for love's sake—the very thing love yearned and cried to keep.

"I thought I was brave, mother," she said, as the vivid recollection of that parting filled her mind. "I little dreamed your sacrifice was greater far than mine. No wonder I bore my sorrow silently. I was your child, with your blood in my veins!"

She stretched out her hands to the moon, fancying that on its rays the spirit of some being strangely noble, and infinitely dear, drew near to kiss the little child Doris. In that weird, unearthly embrace the mutual sacrifice became a thing of joy, no longer to be re-

membered with sadness, but crowned by the laurels of success.

Doris started up, quivering, the faded volume fell to the ground, and lay like a tribute at her feet.

She knelt down and raised it reverently.

"I must have been dreaming," she said. "I thought mother was in the room!"

She opened the book at random, and her eyes sought the first words:—

"Poor little Doris cried herself to sleep, she did not know I was listening at the door. Tears are easily dried, it is the tearless sorrow that really matters. Some day she will realise it was for her happiness—not mine. Some day I may hear her say—"Mother, you were right!"

Doris repeated the words—slowly, softly.

"Mother, you were right. Mother—I am so happy! Perhaps you are listening at my door again,—perhaps!"

A LABOUR OF LOVE.

CHAPTER I.

“OOD-BYE, darlings. I am so sorry to leave you on your holidays.”

A very pretty woman bent down to kiss a pair of rosy-cheeked boys.

They hung round her neck affectionately. She did not seem to fear their little brown fingers would soil her immaculate lace dress. The kisses had an evil effect on her large picture-hat, but she soon rectified the trouble before a mirror in the hall.

The day-school Teddy and Roy attended economised its holidays,—a whole one proved a great event.

Mrs. Stuart's dainty little feet stepped into the Victoria. Teddy caught a glimpse of very high bronze heels, the colour of his mother's hair in the sunlight.

“You have a treat in store to-day,” she said. “Don't forget you lunch with Uncle Robert.”

Sir Robert Dunbar was seldom at home, he lived in a great house a mile distant. The boys were devoted to



"A very pretty woman bent down to kiss a pair of rosy-cheeked boys."

him, perhaps the proverbial love of the cow for the haystack had something to do with their devotion.

As the carriage drove away Teddy followed the large picture-hat shielding its wealth of red-gold hair, with big wistful eyes. "Isn't she pretty?" he said, sighing deeply.

Roy nodded assent, as he stooped to pat a shaggy poodle, whose thick winter coat gave him a hot unfashionable appearance on this glorious spring morning.

"I wish we could do something for her," went on Teddy, continuing his line of thought. "I don't believe she wanted to go to that wedding, she would rather have been with us on our holiday, but the wedding was settled a long time ago. I wonder why people get married?"

Roy considered a moment.

"Oh! it is because they are in love," he said, proud of his superior knowledge on the subject. "When a man loves a girl, I've heard he always wants to do something to please her, so I suppose he marries her because girls like to get married."

"Then I expect I'm in love with mother," replied Teddy, with childish logic. "Roy, I've got an idea!"

He fixed his eyes on the chocolate-coloured poodle basking on the sunny steps.

"Mother said only yesterday she did want Pompey shaved. He feels the heat, and looks so wintry. She asked father to do it, but he hadn't time. You remem-



"A very pretty woman bent down to kiss a pair of rosy-cheeked boys."

ber how smart Pompey looked last year with half his back bare, and two little rosettes of hair left on each side. The horse-clippers are in the stables ; suppose we do it for a surprise? Mother likes to take him out driving with ribbons on his head to match her dress, when his coat is cut—she would be awfully pleased!”

Roy thought it a wonderful idea ; in fact it amounted to inspiration, and together they journeyed in search of the beautifying instrument.

Enticing with biscuits the unsuspecting poodle to a distant shed, the two amateur hair-dressers consulted seriously together.

“It was this half of his back that was shaved last year, from the middle to the tail,” said Roy. “I suppose it would not do to have it the same two years running.”

“No, I suppose not,” murmured Teddy. “Mother likes change, she says fashions alter very quickly. The things in our house are not a bit like other people’s, that is why visitors so often walk round as if they were at a bazaar and call out: ‘Oh, what an original room!’ when they ought to sit down and drink their tea. I guess mother would be quite grateful if we could make Pompey look ‘original.’”

“Well, why not begin the other end, clip his head and the first part of his back, letting the last half hang long? It will be very hard, because the hair is so thick, but we must use the scissors first.”

With many coaxing words, and a renewed supply of biscuits, Pompey was induced to submit to their well-

intentioned operations. In deep earnest the small fingers set to work with astonishing skill. Love gave them patience, defying weariness, though their faces flushed hotter and their arms ached, while the boyish curls grew damp from the moisture on their foreheads. The horse-clippers were not easy weapons to wield, but Teddy mastered the difficulty with a success that surprised himself, and filled Roy's soul with reverent admiration.

Before the task was half finished, the loud ringing of a hand-bell resounded through the garden. Roy let go of Pompey, and danced to the door.

"It's Maria ringing for us to come in and wash our hands. It must be time to start for Uncle Robert's! It wouldn't do to be late; we want to be there as early as we can. I am longing to see the great big live monkey he has brought from Australia, and the baby kangaroo."

Teddy did not stir. His face was very grave, and he looked Roy up and down with an expression of fine contempt. "If we go out to lunch," he said, "we shall not have time to finish Pompey, and mother will come home to find—*this!*"

He gazed sadly at their incomplete work.

"Uncle Robert promised me cherry tart with cream on it," said Roy, convinced so strong an argument would justify desertion.

The thought gave Teddy a pang which he knew to be unworthy.

"So you wouldn't sacrifice a helping of cherry tart—



“ ‘I should be sure to have two helpings, and perhaps three,’ answered Roy, stubbornly.”

for—for mother's sake?" he muttered, growing very red.

"I should be sure to have two helpings, and perhaps three," answered Roy, stubbornly.

"But we started our work to please her," said Teddy. "I can't possibly finish alone, without you to help me. Only think what a tame ending! You would go away—now in the very middle—and spoil everything. Because you want to amuse yourself, you are willing to leave Pompey in patches, with one side of his head bare as my hand, and the other just like a mop. It's a wicked idea! I really could not get on by myself, you know that, it would not be possible for one person to manage. See, Pompey won't stay still an instant! Instead of good, all we have done up till now will turn to harm. How can Pompey go out driving in such a state? Mother would not be the least proud of him. We are doing this to please her, you can't have forgotten that. Of course I want to go to Uncle Robert's just as much as you do, but we mustn't think of ourselves now. I did not know it would take so long, but if you love mother you will give up everything to get finished."

Roy still kept his hand on the door. Uncle Robert always gives us a shilling each. I had meant to buy a kite with mine," he said.

Teddy did not mention his intended purchase, though he knew it well enough, and the memory brought a wave of temptation which seemed calling him from his labour of love, from work to alluring pleasure. On one side he saw an unselfish task to please his mother, on the

other hand rose visions of gilded halls and cherry tarts, of delightful gallops round the park mounted on the same horse with Uncle Robert.

He stood his ground staunchly. Roy must not see how great an effort it was for him to stick to his guns.

Teddy's unrelenting attitude had a strong effect upon Roy. He suddenly felt ashamed of himself; it was not a pleasant sensation to know his brother despised him.

The older boy's influence told on the younger, his example stood out clearly as a thing that must be followed. Ahead lay the path of sacrifice, and there could be no turning aside. It meant a holiday spoilt, but what matter? It was to please mother, to give her a happy surprise, who so often arranged unexpected delights for them.

"Perhaps I'd better tell Maria we are not going," he said.

His voice shook slightly, and he stared through the open door very hard.

"Yes. She knows we may do exactly what we like all to-day for a treat. Maria must walk to "the Hall" and say we are too busy to come to lunch. She might tell Uncle Robert we are very sorry, and give him our best love."

Roy obeyed, leaving Teddy in charge of Pompey. The dog sat up and shook himself. Teddy put a small arm caressingly round his neck.

"You'll be so cool and comfortable, old chap!" he said, and Pompey licked his face in canine worship as

the boy gently scratched him with a broken piece of comb.

The shed appeared to grow suddenly very misty, as Teddy hummed a little defiant tune to try and keep up his spirits.

Roy heard it as he came slowly back, it seemed to give him fresh heart. He tried to pretend he was not disappointed—at any rate he would do his best to make Teddy think so. His quivering lips found it very hard to smile, and something in his throat made speech impossible. He paused outside the shed, bending down to tie the lace of his little canvas shoe. A hot tear dropped on his hand, a tear he brushed hastily aside. "I won't cry," he thought, "it isn't manly! Father never cries, but then, perhaps, he's never disappointed. When I am grown up I shall arrange that these sort of troubles don't happen."

With set lips, and only a few suspicious sniffs which might possibly be put down to a slight cold, Roy returned to his post, holding his head very upright, and keeping his childish features rigid as a mask. Only now and again an unaccountable moisture upon his eye-lashes had to be reckoned with. Teddy, for some unknown reason, kept his eyes turned away. Roy supposed it was from consideration.

So together they recommenced their arduous work without exchanging a word, each hoping the other did not notice the signs of emotion which were so difficult to control.

For quite a long time Teddy went on humming. What was a sacrifice worth unless it could be undertaken cheerfully?

CHAPTER II.

"AT last!" cried Roy, stretching his arms, as Pompey sprang from the table, gleefully revelling in freedom.

A shower of brown fluff and loose curls fell to the ground. The boys appeared almost as pleased to be released as the dog himself. The three bounded out to the garden for a wild race round the lawn. They expanded their cramped lungs by shouting as they ran, Pompey joining in shrill barkings. He apparently forgot that flower beds were made for ornament, and borders demanded respect, for in the new glory of his hairless state he became like a puppy again.

It had seemed an eternity, those hours in the shed. The boys were reminded of it by aching muscles and strained nerves. Pompey's unwillingness to assist by lying still, made the labour momentarily more arduous as the afternoon advanced. Only very stubborn determination could have completed a task, the magnitude of which they fully realized as difficulties increased, and physical fatigue supervened. Now they flung themselves down on the grass, breathless and relieved, to survey their handiwork.

"I never imagined it could have taken so long!" said Teddy. "I think, don't you, its a great success?"





" Maria greeted the brown apparition with a scream of dismay."

"Yes," a little doubtfully from Roy. "I'm not quite sure I didn't like last year's fashion best."

"But that was just the same as every other poodle."

"Suppose we go and show him to Maria. It must be tea-time, and I am awfully hungry."

They scampered back to the house, accompanied by a strangely-grotesque object. The victim of their attentions suggested a poodle as seen in a nightmare, or the illustration of some weird fairy tale on "topsy-turvy-dom!" Maria greeted the brown apparition with a scream of dismay, and shook her apron at him as he tried to jump up and lick her hands.

"Lor! Master Teddy—what have you been up to?" she cried, in accents of horror.

Teddy tried to look unconcerned as he answered with pride:

"We did it all ourselves, and we never hurt him once."

"Well of all the hideous sights—but there!—you wait till your ma comes home! I can't think what she will say, for she is such a one to take a pride in the dog, dressing him up with ribbons and the like! I should guess it will go near to break her heart."

"Don't you—er—think he looks nice?" gasped Teddy.

"Nice! Well I never—if that's your taste!—" and a jeer cut the sentence short. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry, but to see a dog looking such a caution is enough to send a body into hysterics!"

"Come away," whispered Teddy to Roy, "she does

not understand. We know mother likes uncommon things. I will try and explain it to Maria after tea."

But no amount of explanation had any effect upon Maria. She was *bourgeoise* to her finger-tips, and could see no beauty in the unique.

The boys quietly pitied her, happy with the delightful consciousness that they had triumphed over their natural desires, and sacrificed their holiday for a great result.

Roy leant against a tree and stared at the sunset.

"But fancy if mother wasn't pleased after all," he said, his lips trembling slightly.

The lugubrious suggestion sent queer little shivers down Teddy's spine.

"Oh! it couldn't be!" he replied stoutly. His young heart defied the first breath of misfortune, allowing the mere idea no place in his calculations.

He felt the bitterness would be too great to bear, such a thing was impossible in this bright world of spring!

The very atmosphere was full of sweetness, and the promise of summer hovered round them like some unseen magic presence. The gold sun sinking slowly shed a benediction on the garden.

When Mrs. Stuart returned the boys were having their supper upstairs. Lights had been lit in the hall, and Pompey, who barked loudly on principle whenever the front door bell rang, gave forth his noisy welcome, thus forcing attention instantly to his grotesque personality. Husband and wife came together into the



“ ‘ Alfred,’ she gasped, ‘ Oh! Alfred, just look at Pompey.’ ”



light. A cry of horror escaped Mrs. Stuart, her eyes dilated as she pointed to her pet.

"Alfred!" she gasped, "Oh! Alfred, just look at Pompey!"

Maria answered their startled questions in hushed accents. There was a funereal air about her, as if a death had taken place in the house.

"It was the young gentlemen's doing," she said, severely, "it kept them busy all day. They gave up going out to lunch, and told me, Ma'am, it was to please you! Nothing I could say would persuade Master Teddy it wasn't a very good piece of work, and they are proud as peacocks, for all I've scolded them!"

Maria looked terribly forbidding as she gave the story.

Mr. Stuart was kneeling down examining the poodle.

"The young rascals!" he said, as Maria retired, "they deserve a good whipping, and they shall get it too, spoiling the dog for the whole season!"

As Mrs. Stuart gazed at the brown poodle, his hideous appearance became suddenly transformed to her eyes, and she saw in the piteous object only a living monument of her boys' very genuine, though ill-expressed affection.

"It was to please you!" Even the irate Maria had owned as much. Mrs. Stuart guessed with all a mother's intuition the kindly motive which inspired them, involving the sacrifice of their longed-for outing. They had talked for weeks of what they would do at "The Hall,"

when Uncle Robert returned from one of his many foreign tours.

She bent down over the dog, and looked at Alfred from under her big picture-hat. One hand lay on Pompey's shaven head, the other rested detainingly upon her husband's arm.

"Dearest," she whispered, "I want you to do me a favour."

"What is it?" he asked, smiling. Her serious expression puzzled him.

"Those small creatures meant so well! Will you leave it in my hands? Will you rely on my judgment—just this once?"

The pleading blue eyes were irresistible, such eyes were made to gain their way.

"Of course, darling, you shall do as you like," he replied gently, touched by the earnestness of her words. "Women, I know, have strangely keen intuitions, and if you feel strongly on any subject, always follow your instinct, it is bound to be right."

She left him with a light laugh. "You are a dear!" she said.

Very softly she stole upstairs, but the boys heard the rustle of her dress, and came running out to the passage.

In a moment her arms were round them both, and she was listening to the history of their love labour with smiles that spoke gratitude.

"It was a delightful surprise," she cried, "to find you had been thinking of me."



“We knew you would be pleased,” declared Teddy radiantly. “We don’t mind anything now, only Maria could not understand.”

“But I understood!” said the sweet low voice.

As she spoke all the relinquished pleasures of the day were a thousand-fold repaid.

BLACK CHARLOTTA.

CHAPTER I.

“ LOVE curios,” said Miss Bellew, examining a collection of old porcelain, with the scrutiny of a connoisseur.

“So do I,” replied her friend, “curios and gossip, or shall we say gossip and curios? This house makes a perfect museum, and the most wonderful relic of all is surely Black Charlotta herself. There is something strangely marvellous in her perpetual youth and beauty. Perhaps the fire of genius defies age. To the public, Black Charlotta will be for ever young.”

The female critics cast an envious glance in the direction of their hostess.

Charlotta, with her Madonna tresses and eyes of flame, had long since become the leading tragedian of the century.

So thin was she, girdled by a jewelled snake, that her mellow-tinted gown hung like a dead leaf on some graceful willow. Every now and again a suspicion of golden gauze glistened through the soft

material, while round her throat a white foam of tulle vied with the pallor of her face.

"I wonder if we shall meet Marcus Vallentin here this afternoon," whispered Miss Bellew's friend.

"No, certainly not; but don't talk so loud, Rose, and I will tell you about him. Let us pretend to be looking at these enamels."

They bent their heads over a light shelf running along one of the walls. Then Miss Bellew continued in a whisper: "His is rather a strange history, I believe. He was adopted by an old lady who called herself his aunt, and had certainly no idea of his ever taking to the stage. Fortunately, Madame Charlotta Dubarre discovered him, discerned his genius, and made him her leading man. He is not the least like an actor in private life, lives a most tranquil domesticated existence. His wife, a canon's daughter, was very strictly brought up, and will have nothing to do socially with 'the profession,' simply abhors actresses, and refuses even to know so great a celebrity as Black Charlotta! I hear Mrs. Vallentin is very pretty, and has one sweet little girl."

Miss Bellew paused to watch the effect of her words, which she held to be highly interesting.

"Though Madame Dubarre is received at the best houses, I have no doubt Mrs. Vallentin's attitude annoys her," suggested Rose, in a tone of satisfaction.

"Oh! I know it does! I get all my information from the very best authority. My maid is first cousin to Madame's dresser, I hear *everything*! Madame Dubarre had quite a violent scene with Mr. Vallentin last night,

and informed him she should call upon his wife to-morrow. Mrs. Vallentin receives on 'first Wednesdays' in the month."

"What an amusing little *histoire!*" giggled Rose, expanding under the soothing influence of scandal as a flower opens to the sun.

Miss Bellew turned from a table upon which stood a score or more of Chelsea, Derby, and Dresden groups, beautifully decorated, and let her eyes travel towards the great reception room.

"Nearly everybody has gone!" she exclaimed. "I had no idea it was so late."

"There are scarcely a dozen people left, we must say good-bye at once."

Together they hurried into the big gold and white chamber. The actress was still surrounded by a handful of admirers, two or three well known London men, and a lady of title with her unmarried daughter, all listening eagerly to the musical voice of their celebrated hostess.

Miss Bellew and her friend waited for a brief pause, then advanced with outstretched hands. As they did so, a man-servant, holding aside a heavy red curtain, loudly announced: —

"Miss Felicia Vallentin!"

An intense silence fell upon the little group, all eyes were turned in the direction of the doorway.

A glow of light from the fading sun made an amber line across the threshold, embracing in a golden halo the uninvited guest.

A small quaint figure stood hesitatingly by the tall

upright footman, a figure wearing a long picturesque gown, like an old-fashioned child stepping from a canvas.

Under the straight soft dress two little feet in tiny blue shoes peeped out like doll's feet on the parquet floor, while a pair of blue eyes gazed curiously from beneath the rim of a large poke bonnet.

Madame Dubarre was not a woman to be taken off her guard. If a spectre had suddenly appeared, she could not have experienced greater surprise, but concealing any trace of emotion she swept forward, and drew the child towards her with a winning smile.

"As Mrs. Vallentin could not come, she has sent a very charming representative," said the golden voice in explanation to her guests.

"No," began a childish treble, "it wasn't that——"

But the words were covered by Miss Bellew's hasty "good-bye," tactfully echoed by the few remaining guests. One by one they shook Black Charlotta's heavily ringed hand, and beat a hasty retreat.

It was well known that Mrs. Vallentin had never yet been seen at Madame Dubarre's receptions.

The red velvet curtain fell back into its place, and the big white room with the gold furniture held but two figures.

"Why have you come, child?" asked the actress.

There was something of bitterness, something of love, strangely intermingling in her tone.

Felicia looked up into the beautiful face bending over her. Then she clasped her baby fingers together in an attitude of supplication.

"It's a great secret why I came, and please promise not to be angry. I came" (lowering her voice to a confidential whisper) "to ask if you would be ever so kind, and not make mother cry any more. You see we were quite happy at home until yesterday, when everything went wrong, and daddy got, oh! so cross. I found out it was all about you. Daddy said you were coming to our house to-morrow; I suppose to do something dreadful! Would you have flown down the chimney on a broomstick? I was so afraid you meant to turn us into frogs or mice. I expect you can work lots of evil spells. Mother was so frightened that she said she would go back and live with grandpapa. His house is very dark and quiet, a big grey house in the cathedral gardens. Nobody ever laughs there, but it would be a good place to hide in. Daddy hated the thought of your coming to see us, just as much as mother did; but he told her he could not say no to Black Charlotta, because she had engaged him, and it would not do to offend her! Daddy is very brave; if a spirit were ever so black he would not run away. Now I do hope you won't come, as I can't make up my mind whether to go with mother or stay behind. Why are you called Black Charlotta? Is it because your soul is not white?"

The question was put so innocently, the words said so simply, with such genuine distress and eager pleading, that a sudden rush of tears hid themselves under Black Charlotta's long dark lashes.

"My hair is very black," she replied, "so the public gave me that name long, long ago. I am a great

favourite with the world, little one. As for my soul—well, it isn't a narrow soul, which is about all I can say for it."

The pain in her voice did not escape the child's quick ear.

"Are you unhappy too?" she asked, laying her soft little fingers against Charlotta's cheek.

The actress put her arms round Felicia's neck, kneeling down, so that the curly head was on a level with her shoulder.

"No, my dear, I can't afford to be unhappy."

"I didn't know it cost anything," said Felicia.

"The price of beauty—the price of youth. I have to keep young, and sorrow ages. But how did you come here, small mite, all by yourself? Were you not frightened?"

"I wasn't alone," answered Felicia, with pride. "A big boy brought me. I happen to be very fond of him. He is a friend of mine, he is fourteen. We came together all the way from Hampstead. If you look through the window you will see him outside. He has known your house for a long time, he says lots of people know it in London, because it is so big, like the house of a duke. I was very frightened when I got to the door, I half wanted to run away, but I kept thinking of poor mamma, it was for her sake I came, you see."

"Was this the first—the very first—quarrel you have ever heard between your parents?"

Felicia nodded.



"Yes, and that made me feel I must do something. At first I thought I would say in my prayers every night, 'Please God keep away Black Charlotta,' but it seemed safest not to leave it only to God. Perhaps if mamma saw you she would not mind so much. I am sure she cannot know how kind and pretty you are, and that you wear such lots of lovely sparkling things! I expected to find a very rich old witch, and you are much more like a fairy princess."

An expression of intense longing crept over Charlotta's features as she fixed her great eyes on the child. The praises of nations seemed as nothing just then compared with the simple commendation of innocent baby lips.

"What have I done that is kind?" she asked.

"You looked at me," said Felicia, "and I didn't feel frightened any more."

Charlotta smiled. The explanation appeared so very slight.

"I suppose," she said, "you would do anything for your mother, even though it cost you pain?"

"Yes," murmured Felicia, playing with the jewelled serpent.

"And coming to see me was a dreadful ordeal, one that took all your pluck to face, but you did not mind because love guided you. That is very wonderful, it strikes home to the heart in a strange way. I like to think of it, to believe in it! Evidently it is a good thing to be a mother. Children are sometimes sent to smooth the rough places for those so much older and wiser than

themselves, perhaps the angels use the children's lips! Yet some people forget—even their motherhood!"

As Black Charlotta spoke these enigmatical words, there rang again that sharp, almost bitter note in her melodious voice. "But I am afraid, Felicia," she continued, with an effort at brightness, "the fact that I am not an ugly old witch won't alter matters. Isn't it a pity? for I should so much have enjoyed seeing you again. But then there are mamma's tears, we cannot get over them—or the quarrel—not forgetting that terrible threat to return to grandpapa, and live under the shadow of the great cathedral! you must think of me sometimes as the fairy princess, the princess who wasn't quite good enough for mamma to know. You might say in your prayers still, 'Please God keep away Black Charlotta,' in case I should be tempted. You don't know how much I want to see your home, or how dearly I long to meet your mother!"

She kissed the child passionately and rose. Her hand shook convulsively as she rang the bell, and her lips quivered in an odd unusual way.

"I shall send you home in my carriage," she said. "I can't let you wander about alone with a boy of fourteen. You will get back before your father has to leave for the theatre. They will be thinking you are lost!"

* * * * *

A proud and happy little girl drove through London in the twilight, behind a pair of high-stepping piebalds.

She settled her small self comfortably on the cushions



with a sigh of satisfaction, and blinked from under her poke bonnet at the boy, her escort and devoted slave.

"It has all come right," she said. "I made Black Charlotta understand at once. Won't mamma be glad?"

The boy was less optimistic.

"We've done our best, but there is so much ingratitude in the world," he replied, "that one never knows!"

"I don't care a scrap about gratitude," replied Felicia, "if only mamma doesn't cry any more."

CHAPTER II.

FELICIA could not sleep that night, she lay thinking over the events of the day. Firstly, her sudden determination to seek out Black Charlotta, then the interview in the gold and white chamber with a dazzling woman whose eyes were bright like stars, and lastly the return in state to Hampstead. Felicia was strangely troubled and perplexed by subsequent happenings. Not only had her parents been seriously alarmed at her absence, but the recitation of her doings in no way cleared the atmosphere. On the contrary, Mr. Vallentin paced the room in a frenzy of nervous irritation.

"It is all from this absurd fuss you have been making!" he said to his wife. "Confound the child!"

While Mrs. Vallentin, half laughing, half crying, replied in an hysterical outburst that she was glad, most extraordinarily glad, Madame Dubarre should know the truth.

In the midst of it all Felicia's nurse appeared, and whisked her off to bed, unkissed by either parent.

No wonder then she lay wakefully tossing under the white lace curtains, with the moonlight twinkling on her little blue coverlet.

At last she caught the sound of a footstep in the corridor, and a moment later the welcome rustle of a silk dress set Felicia's heart beating faster.

"Is that you, mummy?" she asked, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

A girlish figure crept to the bedside, and a fair young head bent to Felicia.

"Yes, darling. Why are you not asleep?"

"I was waiting for you to come such a long time. It must be very late, for I heard father drive away hours and hours ago."

"It is late, but I could not come before."

"Were you crying again?"

"N-o" (somewhat uncertainly). "Daddy sent you a kiss, Felicia, through me, and we are never going to quarrel any more, especially not over an old woman like Madame Dubarre!"

"Oh! but she isn't old!" declared the child. "She's young and beautiful, mummy. I'm sure if you saw her you would want her to come often. I told her I thought perhaps you did not know how pretty she was."

"Her looks would make no difference. I don't care if she is ugly or beautiful. It is the principle of the thing. I know the sort of woman she must be!"

Felicia remembered the words, "it isn't a narrow soul," and wondered why they returned at that moment.

"How can you know, mamma, if you have never seen her?" asked Felicia, her eyes expanding. "I thought dreadful things about her too before our talk together. I shivered when the big man took me upstairs. I wondered if there would be lions and tigers about, but the house was so lovely inside, not a bit like a witch's cave. I don't think a queen's palace could have been more lovely. And when I saw her, then I knew it would all come right, one had only to see her to be quite sure she could not hurt a person. She took my hands so kindly, and gave them a squeeze; I loved her at once. She smiled, and was not at all angry with me for coming, but afterwards there were tears in her eyes instead. She looked very unhappy, and I wanted to comfort her; you would have wanted to comfort her if you had seen her face! I did wish you had been there, for I could think of nothing to say. Let me see if I can remember what she said. 'You don't know how much I want to see your home, or how dearly I long to meet your mother!' Yes, those were her very words. Indeed, mamma, she did not mean any harm, poor Black Charlotta! She kissed me as she talked, and she trembled too. Then I kissed her back many times, somehow I wanted to cry as well."

While Mrs. Vallentin listened, a guilty sensation stole over her. The simple words were a rebuke, and brought before her eyes the vision of that tragic face, whose features she knew so well from behind the footlights.

This woman had been kind to Felicia, though the child, in all ignorance, had deeply insulted her—no harsh words, no reviling of the mother, only friendship and tears.

"What a picture they must have made together!" thought Mrs. Vallentin; and her heart softened, while something very like a blush crept to her cheek.

"What else did Black Charlotta say?" she asked.

"Oh! such lots of things, I can't remember all. There was something about angels using children's lips, and I thought if she had been very wicked she would not have known there were such people as angels. And when I drove away she came out on to a balcony full of flowers, and kissed her hand to me, and waved her handkerchief, then she looked more than ever like a fairy princess. I kept looking back till we were out of sight, and just as the carriage turned the corner, I saw the handkerchief go up to her eyes, and she ran quickly into the house. I promised to think of her sometimes—you won't mind that, will you, mamma?—the fairy princess who isn't quite good enough for you to know."

The words came sleepily, with little yawns between them.

"Don't child, don't! You make me seem so wicked."

Mrs. Vallentin spoke quickly, for she felt her pulses throb, and a sudden revulsion of feeling gripped her soul.

"Listen, Felicia," she said, impulsively, "you shall not only think of her, you shall see her again! We will go together, you and I."



"It is too late to make amends now."



"To Black Charlotta? Oh! mamma, that will be nice! Do you really mean it? I think daddy will be very glad."

Mrs. Vallentin's thoughts travelled quickly. No sooner did she see her error, than a spontaneous desire to make amends prompted this sudden resolve. It was an awkward position to face, to ask pardon of Black Charlotta, to try to compensate for the past; but she told herself severely it must be done.

"I believe daddy has come in," said Felicia. "Listen, he is on the stairs."

"Yes, little sharp-ears, you are right," replied Mrs. Vallentin, going to the door. "I did not know it was quite so late!"

"Come in, daddy," cried the child's shrill voice, with an unmistakable note of glee in its clear tone. "We have something to tell you!"

A tall figure advanced to the bed. Mrs. Vallentin saw at once her husband was troubled, depressed.

"Felicia and I are going together to see Madame Dubarre to-morrow," she said, slipping her hand through his arm. "I have made up my mind, Marcus."

She waited smilingly for his reply.

"It is too late to make amends now."

He drew her on one side, and spoke in an undertone.

"As I left the theatre to-night, Madame Dubarre handed me this letter. 'For your wife,' she said, 'but you may read it on your way home.' Those were the only words she addressed to me throughout the evening, her manner was very strained. She appeared upset, she nearly broke down on the stage. I have not opened the

letter, but it is evidently an announcement to you of my dismissal."

He added no word of rebuke, but his face was a silent reproach.

"We will open it together," he continued, taking the envelope to the light, and breaking Charlotta's big black seal.

Silently they read the following lines:—

"I have a confession to make to you and Marcus Vallentin. It is the confession of an unhappy woman who desired eternal youth. With that object, in my folly I allowed conceit to master maternal affection. Children are milestones marking the years; so when my husband died, I gave up my baby son to the care of a hireling, that in the future his existence might not publish my age. In secret I guided his life, and saw he wanted for nothing. To-day my eyes were opened to all I had lost. Felicia, little Felicia, taught me it was good to be a mother. It rests with you two whether my yearning desire may be gratified, as that son was Marcus Vallentin. Can you both forgive me? Will you acknowledge such a mother for the sake of the love you bear your own child? God knows I need you all!"

Their eyes met, expressing more eloquently than words Black Charlotta's pardon.

"Will daddy come with us to see the fairy princess?" piped a very sleepy voice from the bed.

"Yes, indeed!" said Mrs. Vallentin.

"We won't call her 'black' any more, will we?" murmured Felicia, as she entered dreamland.



BLARNEY.

CHAPTER I.



MISS LEVINA FLINTOFF sniffed audibly, and shook her handkerchief in the face of a woolly sheepdog pressing his unwelcome body against her black silk skirt.

"Go away, you horrid creature! Dear me!—what a very offensive coat! I wonder, Lorna, you can keep such an animal on the premises."

She directed this last remark to Mrs. Percival, who was pouring out tea in a veranda,—bright with crimson creepers that glowed in the autumn sun. Miss Levina Flintoff saw only the wasps buzzing about the leaves, and deplored the prevailing custom of tea-drinking out of doors.

"Call Blarney away," said Mrs. Percival to a small boy seated on the steps, hugging a pair of sunburnt knees, his little brown feet encased in sandals, the latest fad of the fashionable mother.

Blarney.

He shook his fair curls off his forehead as he rose and drew the offender gently aside. His hand rested lovingly on the dog's collar.

"I'm so sorry," murmured Mrs. Percival, as her elderly guest began picking the loose hairs from the deep flounce upon which Blarney's head had rested. "He really is not fit for polite society, poor dog—though he has been a beauty in his time. Age seems telling on him dreadfully. I know it would be a kindness to have him put away, yet I cannot summon sufficient strength of mind to sign his death-warrant. Such an old friend! Why, he carries about with him a whole history of associations."

"And probably a good deal more," retorted Miss Flintoff, acidly, "in that shaggy coat of his! Long-haired dogs are seldom clean. I object to them on principle."

"I shall never have another," sighed Mrs. Percival, "but what am I to do? You see, we have no man in the house. If my poor husband were alive. But, there! As I said before, I can't arrange for Blarney to be poisoned, much as I should feel the relief once the poor dog was gone! I am absurdly sensitive; everybody tells me so! Kenneth, dear," speaking to the small boy, "take Blarney into the garden. Miss Flintoff can't enjoy her tea while he is here."

Kenneth obeyed. He had listened to the conversation with a strained look on his face, unnatural in one so young. After all, his mother was merely repeating what

she had said a dozen times before, what she almost daily said as Blarney's infirmities increased. Yet it invariably set his heart beating quicker with a vague, paralyzing terror. The old sheepdog was brother and sister to the solitary child, and ranked next in his affections to the pretty mother who so often left him to spend long days in London. He thought of his mother as a beautiful but somewhat helpless being, a fairy princess whom he must protect, a lady of chiffons and laces, altogether adorable. A harsh word from her made the world a wilderness—smiles and commendation were as jewels in the crown of his happiest hours. Often he would think how best he could please her, saying to himself: "Father might have done this, or that!"—the father he had never seen.

And Lorna Percival appreciated her child's devotion, though her shallow nature could in no way pierce its depth.

Along the line of sunlight gilding the garden path Kenneth and Blarney wandered side by side, Blarney dragging his legs wearily. Presently Kenneth paused and flung himself down on a mossy bank, his forehead puckered in frowns, his lips apart as if with horror. Blarney edged up to him, and pushed his wide face under his little master's elbow, thus inducing the disengaged arm to fall about his neck.

"Blarney," whispered a low voice, "do you know the winter is coming?"

Blarney did not seem to care. He was used to long,

rambling conversations, and merely in reply vouchsafed a friendly sniff.

"It was last year, Blarney, your rheumatism came—and—and crippled you. Mother says it is sure to come again. I am thinking, too, you will be rather cold, there are so many little bald patches on your back."

He looked in the glazed eyes.

"She said it would be a kindness if—if—but, no, I can't believe that! I should like to be strong-minded, Blarney, and help mother; but I want you so much, for I love you—I love you! I think she must have forgotten me when she told Miss Flintoff there was no man in the house. Blarney, dear, I don't mind your frouzy old coat, and you shall sleep on my bed, under my quilt, all the winter!"

There were tears in the bright eyes of the boy, gazing into the hazy, dim eyes of the dog.

"No, I don't mind you, that is the worst of it! You see, we have to think about women first—they are so much more important."

He hid his face on Blarney's neck and struggled with himself. The idea which had laid hold of the childish mind was in its very simplicity strangely magnificent. He was dreaming of self-sacrifice, remembering Abraham in the large book upstairs of Bible pictures, with a limp and ill-drawn Isaac.

Thus he stayed for a long, long while, unconsciously submitting his will to the inborn instincts of heroism. A strangely-fanciful child, given to thoughtfulness, and

passionate in his love for the gentle woman who ruled him.

"If it had been anyone but Blarney," he said. "If it had been cook or Janet, or even Miss Flintoff! Who would mind if Miss Flintoff had to be poisoned? Nobody likes her!"

So he talked to himself—to Blarney—and argued with Fate, as many older, wiser tongues argue incessantly. No wonder life's apparent unfairness puzzled the young philosopher.

A voice behind him, a step on the gravel, scattered his reflections and made Blarney start up with a sharp bark.

"My good child, you should not lie with your head near that horrible dog! said Levina Flintoff; "it isn't fit, really."

"I can't help hugging him," said the boy, tearfully. "I think he is going to die to-morrow."

"The best thing that could happen! Life can't be any pleasure to the poor beast in such a state, and your mother would be thankful."

"To-morrow," murmured Kenneth, "how near it seems, and she will be in London; she won't know, so she won't suffer; afterwards she will be glad."

Miss Flintoff was out of ear-shot. Kenneth turned towards the house. He heard his mother calling.

"She will be glad," he repeated; "come, Blarney."

There was a sob in Kenneth's voice, but Blarney followed with a bound.

CHAPTER II.

KENNETH drove to the station the following morning with his mother. He begged that Blarney might be allowed in the victoria to keep him company on the way back, but Mrs. Percival refused.

"I've got on a new dress, Kenny," she said. "Blarney would ruin it with his hairs. He has spoilt enough of my things already!"

The child was very silent as they drove through the mellow-tinted lanes, but Mrs. Percival, busy with her own thoughts, failed to notice the far-away look in his eyes, and the almost tragic droop of the little rosebud mouth.

"Mother, dear," he asked, "why do you keep smiling? Are you very happy?"

"Yes, dear, happier than I have been for years!"

"Why, mother?"

She laughed, merrily.

"Well, Kenny, it is rather difficult to say. I suppose my heart is lighter, that's all."

He watched her curiously. Was it possible she guessed that on her return the faithful aged creature, she had lately nicknamed her "thorn in the flesh," would be a creature no longer, but dust and ashes? He dared not ask her any further questions, but surely there was something significant in the fervent kiss she gave him as she said good-bye, the little extra squeeze, and the

breezy wave of her handkerchief as the carriage drove away.

"I must not disappoint her," Kenneth told himself. "She said her heart was lighter. She didn't know that mine was breaking."

He curled himself round on the cushions, with his legs tucked under his body, his eyes seeing nothing of the scenery. Instead he was counting the wasted moments that might have been spent with Blarney.

The morning gave no opportunity for the enlargement of his plans. There were lessons to do and he had not a moment alone. After lunch, however, the Fates played into his hands. He was left to amuse himself in the garden with his never-failing companion, the shaggy sheepdog, who followed him everywhere.

Slowly Kenneth walked to the gate and hesitatingly pushed it open. He was not often allowed alone in the road, but to-day seemed different to other days, and surely could not count.

Together the child and dog turned their steps towards the village. A mournful couple they looked, proceeding at a funeral pace, the boy keeping a firm hold upon his courage and struggling with his tears; the dog, lame and nearly blind, conscious that his master sorrowed, with the instinctive sympathy of dumb creatures.

At last the little line of shops was reached. Kenneth and his well-beloved stood on the threshold of the chemist's door.

"Even now," whispered a tempting voice, "it is not too late; even now you can draw back."

Kenneth, frightened by the force of the temptation, dashed into the shop, as if he had been running, and stood panting before the counter. Blarney crawled on a chair, and with his mouth wide open, showing a large extent of pink tongue, breathed in the chemist's face.

"Good afternoon, sir," said a cheerful, red-headed man, who appeared to Kenneth like some horrible harbinger of death.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Strawson," replied the little figure, who had never before ventured alone into the sacred precincts of a shop. "Will you kindly tell me how much it costs to poison a dog?"

His intense bitterness of heart made him speak with enforced cheerfulness.

"It's this old thing I suppose you are wanting to be rid of?" said Mr. Strawson, patting Blarney's head. "He must be a trouble to himself and everybody; but, there! you could not have brought him to a better place. I've done away with 'undreds and 'undreds in my time."

The murderer smiled affably at the shuddering child.

Kenneth nodded, and produced a tin money-box from under his arm.

"This," he said, "has a great many pennies, but it must be broken to get them out. Would you be good enough to break it, to see if I can afford the poison?"

Mr. Strawson complied with the request, and counted a shilling in separate coins.

"Oh, yes, that will cover it—easy," declared the chemist, reassuringly. "So now, if you like to wait and



"Kenneth produced a tin money-box."

—

hear it is all over, I'll take the dog into my back yard, and settle matters at once."

Kenneth nodded—he could not speak, nor did he take a farewell look at Blarney.

He just strolled to the door and pretended to hum a tune, watching the figures passing to and fro in the village street.

It seemed to him an eternity of suffering before a voice said, quite happily:—

"Went off beautifully—without so much as a kick; do you want the remains of your broken money-box, sir, and would you like to see the dog?"

"No, oh! no; but thank you very much."

The tremulous words came quickly, and then the boy was gone.

"Poor little chap! he didn't quite like losing his old friend," said Mr. Strawson.

CHAPTER III.

MRS PERCIVAL did not return until late. Nobody had missed Blarney, and when she stole into Kenneth's room to kiss him he pretended to be asleep. He felt he could not speak of it till the morning—the sorrow was too recent, the wound too sore.

He woke at daybreak, and lay tossing for hours, till at last Janet came to draw up the blinds.

"You won't be dressed in time to have breakfast with your mother," she said.

"Why not?" he asked, surprised.

"Mrs Percival is breakfasting in her room; she is going to town again early——"

Kenneth did not wait to hear more; he jumped out of bed and ran to his mother.

"Come in, darling," she cried, bending to kiss him, with a radiant smile. She looked prettier than ever, and a soft pink flush glowed in her cheeks. "Do you know, Kenny, I am quite upset; the servants tell me they can't find poor dear old Blarney."

The boy caught his breath and turned his head away.

"You won't see Blarney any more: I took him to be—poisoned—yesterday."

The halting words sounded defiant; Mrs. Percival could hardly believe her ears.

"You—you did that!" she gasped, horrified—"without consulting me? You let Blarney be poisoned, and I never said good-bye? How dared you, Kenneth? To choose such a time as this," she added, mysteriously, "when I would not for the world have had your father's dog killed!"

"But you said——" began Kenneth.

"Oh! I say a great many things I don't mean. What right had you to twist my words? But, oh! it's just like a boy—they are born cruel, they love to kill. When they are older the mania for slaughter is called 'sport'—as children it takes a meaner, lower form. Somehow I thought you were different, Kenneth, a nice, kind little boy, who wouldn't want things to die. I am thoroughly

annoyed and disgusted with you. I don't want to hear anything more about it or see you again to-day. You have hurt me very much, more than I can express in words."

She turned her back on him petulantly. She cared for the dog for old times' sake, and could not forgive the harsh deed.

Kenneth walked out of the room, numb and dazed. So his sacrifice had been in vain—the awful misery, all useless—and nothing could recall the dead.

He felt quite tearless, now and everything seemed far away. He hardly remembered he was misjudged. The words had proved so severe a shock that his poor little brain seemed to totter and grow confused.

"Just like a boy," she had said; "they are born cruel!" And Blarney might have lived! Blarney might have lived!

He did not see her again. He heard the carriage come to the door, but would not look out of the window. The servants had been told he was in disgrace, and paid him scant attention. He could not follow his lesson; he left his meals untasted.

"She does not love me any more," he said, "and I've no Blarney!"

This summed up such a store of misery that thought became an effort; he was conscious of one consuming desire, and one alone.

Almost mechanically he repeated the history of the previous afternoon, his mind set upon a definite object,

only this time, as he opened the garden gate and marched towards the village, his feet moved quickly, and his cheeks were like flame.

How it all came back as he reached the chemist's shop—Blarney sitting on the chair, with his tongue hanging out, and his good-natured tail wagging; the red-haired man cheerful as ever behind the counter, the mocking sun shining upon the glass stoppers of mysterious bottles in a row.

With feverish haste the child advanced. This time he carried no money-box, brought no dog.

His eyes had a strange light in them, but he spoke boldly—no sign of hesitation, no faltering now.

"If you please, Mr. Strawson, would you kindly tell me your charge for poisoning a boy?"

Mr. Strawson started—at first he smiled as if at a joke, then he grew suddenly grave.

"It depends what kind of a boy," he replied.

"Well, you see, it happens to be myself. Mother did not want poor Blarney to be killed after all, but I don't think she would mind about me. I haven't any money left—you must put it down on mother's bill. She will understand why I did not want to live."

His voice became dreamy; he seemed to be looking through Mr. Strawson at something beyond.

"Wait a minute, little sir," said Mr. Strawson, quickly, "I'll just consult my old woman; she knows more about these things than I do. Eliza!" he called, "Eliza!" and there were whisperings in the passage.



"The young gentleman has gone clean daft."



"The young gentleman has gone clean daft. You look after him while I go and fetch Mrs. Percival. He's got a poisoning mania ; yesterday it was a dog, to-day it is himself !"

Eliza rose to the occasion. She invited Kenneth to her parlour and asked him to share her meal.

Mr. Strawson was rather busy for the moment. He would attend to the matter after tea, she explained ; and with a persuasive smile coaxed him to eat some bread and jam.

She was struck by the utter look of hopelessness in the child's eyes. She thought she had never seen anything quite so sad.

"There ! there ! dear," she said, regarding him sympathetically ; "you'll be better soon. Lor' ! you do look bad !"

"I am quite well, thank you," he told her, politely. "I suppose you think I must be ill because I am going to die, but people can die quite easily, without being ill at all. That's just where Mr. Strawson is so clever. He keeps poison here on purpose. Didn't you know?"—seeing her expression of horror.

"Well," she gasped, "well, you are a little cure !"

He gazed dreamily into the fire and folded his small hands. "No," he murmured, "there's no cure ; it's so quick, one doesn't even kick—that's the best of—of—poison."

Mrs. Strawson shuddered ; an uncanny chill crept over her. He looked so ethereal and strange in the

flickering light that she was vaguely conscious of sudden fear. Her eyes travelled to the loudly ticking clock ; she counted the moments and fidgeted uneasily, seeking about for a toy to distract his mind.

A grotesque china dog on the mantelpiece arrested her attention. Carefully she took it down and placed it beside him on the table.

"Look, deary, at the pretty bow-wow," she said. "Fond of dogs, eh?"

He let his head fall on his hands, and the hot tears coursed through his fingers, while his whole body shook with suppressed sobs.

"Well, I never!" she muttered, under her breath ; "must be daft, and no mistake. Did anyone ever see the like?"

She relapsed into silence, and sat watching him pityingly, wondering when her husband would return.

Meanwhile Mr. Strawson was running in the direction of Kenneth's home, but, before he had gone many yards, the sight of a carriage caused him to draw up suddenly and wave to the driver to stop.

The carriage contained Mrs. Percival and a gentleman.

"Excuse me, madam," apologized Mr. Strawson ; "excuse me, I pray, but your little boy——"

"Kenneth!—what of Kenneth?" she asked, quickly, growing very white.

All that day her hasty words of the morning haunted her. She began to see the motives which prompted the child's action ; she remembered how deeply he loved the

dog, and recalled his unceasing consideration for her, his great unselfishness. To relieve her mind she had told Robert Clive the story in the train, and now its strange sequel was gasped out by Mr. Strawson in tones of polite concern.

The horses' heads were turned, and the carriage drew up quickly in front of the chemist's shop.

Mrs. Percival alighted and followed her guide to the dingy room, where a sad, weary atom of unrest sadly contemplated a slice of bread and jam.

He did not hear her enter ; he seemed lost in a doleful reverie. The sight of his altered face sent a sharp pang of remorse through the mother's heart. She threw Mrs. Strawson a look of gratitude, and swept past her to Kenneth's side.

She touched him lightly on the shoulder ; he did not move.

"Kenny!" she said.

A shudder ran over him as he recognised her voice.

"Kenny, why aren't you glad to see me? You have never welcomed poor mother like this before! Kenny, darling, don't you know I love you? What made you think of poisoning yourself?"

He glanced up, an expression of surprise lightening his features.

"I thought you would be glad ; you called me cruel, you said I hurt you, and Mr. Strawson does it so quickly——"

"Kenny, how can you?"

Blarney.

She kissed him again and again as she spoke.

"Oh, mother, I didn't really want to die ; it was only to please you ; but now I'm so glad I did not make a second mistake. What a good thing you came in time ; Mr. Strawson was going to do it directly after tea."

There were tears in Mrs. Percival's eyes as she bore the truant lovingly away, keeping her arm tightly round him in the carriage.

Curiously he scanned the tall figure of the stranger, who willingly made room for him, a man occupying Kenneth's seat, beside Mrs. Percival. The kind eyes looked back into the boy's with a friendly glance. Little was said.

Not until later in the day, when the miseries of the past were all but forgotten, did Kenneth explore his new friend's talents.

Robert Clive loved children, and romped with Kenneth in the garden, till Mrs. Percival, out of sheer pity for her visitor, felt bound to interfere.

"That's enough, Kenny, you must not tire Mr. Clive."

Kenneth, an example of youth's elasticity, pleaded for a continuance of the game.

"He likes it, mother, he said so himself," pointing to their guest.

The three were standing together in the shade of the shrubbery.

"And do you know," continued Kenneth, in a stage whisper, "Mr. Clive told me he would like to stay here always, only he isn't quite sure yet if you will let him."



The man and woman looked at each other ; they both smiled.

"Perhaps he would rather see a little more of you, Kenny, before he decides," answered Mrs. Percival.

Robert Clive tossed the boy up in the air and landed him on his shoulder.

"Now, youngster, what do you think? Should I make a good papa?"

Kenneth grew suddenly grave—an awed look stole into his eyes.

"Oh! I see it all," he murmured, seriously. "God has sent you to us instead of Blarney. That is why mother is happy again. I'm so glad!"



THE LADY WHO SMILES.



MOMENT ago I was re-reading a month-old letter from my twin sister, Sylvia.

I have often called her a strange, enigmatical woman. She lives a great deal alone, and her pen is her best friend.

When her heart is full and she cannot speak, the little steel nib like a golden key opens the locked door. The little steel nib becomes a magic mouth-piece, drawing out her true feelings, till I see before me on a simple sheet of grey note-paper, Sylvia's life.

We are separated by a great chasm called "Gulf-of marriage." Sylvia, though orphaned and wealthy, is not a marrying woman. I saw this in her queer smile which contradicted her tear-dimmed eyes, as I passed through "the picturesque gateway leading to a commonplace estate."

Sylvia is quite alone, and the mistress of two fine houses (our twin fortunes being equally divided). In Portman Square she gathers round her a circle of clever acquaintances, and "La France" (an old castle near the

sea, so named in compliment to the pink "La France" rose) is her home of leisure hours and sweet solitude.

The month-old letter bears a London postmark. The hurried handwriting, emblematical of London life, shows traces of wild exultation, of spirits let loose between a steel pen and an ink pot. I read it again by the light of recent events, with a choking sensation in my throat. Thank Heaven! I have not to read aloud, at the sight of the very first line—I am out of breath.

"LITTLE TWIN,—I have lost something this morning! Shall I tell you what? All the ugly reality of life! I don't know where it has gone—possibly it is only mislaid—I have spring-cleaned my soul. I am sixteen again; a few days ago I should have thought it a superhuman effort to become sixteen.

"And all this—because I have made a friend!

"'Isn't it pitiful?' you will say to your husband, and your big boys and girls, 'listen to her—just listen to Sylvia!'

"But are you not longing to know more? Oh! superior married lady—you may laugh, and accuse me of being in love, that is always the bourgeoisie idea! Yet love mounts to the heights, while friendship is content to sit in the valley basking in the sunshine of pure satisfaction.

"I bask, and remain in the valley; I have made a *friend!*"

Sylvia seldom signs her letters to me—she thinks it so unnecessary.

Poor little letter! How completely I missed a month ago the pathos summed up in those five words, "I have made a friend!" Sylvia, with her long visiting list, her talents, and serious interests in life—could one friend more or less matter to her?

It seems, yes.

The month-old letter lies beside another written yesterday, from that exceptionally placid and beautiful spot, "La France." The fat, pink roses must be in full bloom now; I fancy the grey note-paper brings something of their perfume. Then I remember the scent on my handkerchief.

The letter from the country outstrips the letter written in town. It is longer, fuller, more explicit:

"LITTLE TWIN,—If I had but a grain of literary inspiration I would tell you in half-a-dozen words of my Spring-cleaned soul's speedy rusting, but I daresay you know it all without the telling.

"Pray God you may never be the outside friend of a great man—a great genius!

"He may be kind to the outside friend, he may even love her a little, with the high and lofty patronage of his splendid intelligence, but the noisy clamouring world pushes ever between them, pulling at his coat sleeve, jostling her aside. Even in death he is monopolised by the crowd. Her silent tears are swamped and drowned in a surging sea of public lamentation, a world's sympathy, a nation's grief!

"All this I have met and tasted—my friend is dead.

The newspapers spread details of his private life and conversation, nothing appeared too sacred for publication. He was laid in a noble tomb, walled round with state ; then the outside friend felt half ashamed to name her friendship for fear of seeming boastful. Little Twin, you must not come to me. I have to be alone. Here in my solitude—amongst the flowers, in the glaring sun, or the cool evening—it is the same, the same. I mourn for a lost intercourse.

“ You know in my bitterest moments I have always a soft spot in my heart for children. Once or twice in the quiet lanes I have met a little boy, rosy-cheeked, brown-kneed, flaxen-haired. I stopped to speak to him ; his quaint prattle soothed me. To my surprise yesterday I met him at my gates, peering in with curious eyes. The sight of the small figure filled me with peculiar pain, he looked so happy, so full of life. I felt so dead, so full of death !

“ ‘ May I come inside ? ’ he asked, ‘ and play games with you ? ’

“ I wondered at the little piping voice addressing me thus confidentially, and tried to think what the girl of sixteen would have done, only a month ago.

“ I opened the gate, nodding,—because I could not speak. He slipped his sunburnt hand in mine, dragging me towards a small stream, rippling with oily eddies.

“ ‘ We’ll play down here, where it’s nice and wet,’ he said.

“ Through that game of astounding mysteries and



The Lady who Smiles.

127

innocent delights, I remembered three old verses which struck me as peculiarly in harmony with the situation.

Far have you come, my lady, from the town.
And far from all your sorrows, if you please,
To smell the good sea winds and hear the seas,
And in the meadows lay your body down.

To find your pale face grow from pale to brown,
Your sad eyes growing brighter by degrees;
Far have you come, my lady, from the town,
And far from all your sorrows, if you please.

Here in this seaboard land of old renown,
In meadow grass go wading to the knees;
Bathe your whole soul a while in simple ease;
There is no sorrow but the sea can drown;
Far have you come, my lady, from the town.

"I sang the verses to an impromptu tune of my own, as I entered obediently into every childish prank suggested by my young guide. At last, when we were exhausted, I asked him why he had selected me as a playmate. The quick reply took my breath away.

"'You are the lady who smiles,' he said, this being evidently a full and sufficient explanation.

"Youth is very extraordinary, is it not, little Twin?"

Here the letter from "the lady who smiles" breaks off, blotted by a single tear.



FALLEN AMONGST THIEVES.

CHAPTER I.



THE country had been washed by a heavy shower of rain and lay smiling after its bath.

Every leaf and flower in the Rectory garden showed signs of reviving energy ; as far as eye could reach the freshness gleamed visibly on fields and hedge-rows, while across the sky a magnificent rainbow decked the grey clouds with colour.

Eric, the Rector's small son, came out into the garden with the general brightness. His spirits had drooped like the flowers during the recent storm.

Now the sweet odours from the damp earth, with the scent of September roses, made the air delicious to breathe, and Eric ran joyfully along the damp paths, the gravel shining like silver under the magic touch of released sunbeams.

At the far end of the shrubbery, a gate leading to the country road had been adopted by Eric as a swing. Here he would sit, riding his imaginary horse, singing to himself like the happy birds twittering in the trees

above. So full of life's joy was this atom of humanity, he could not realise that beyond his enchanted garden—the playground of glad hours—lay a vast world, through which stalked "Misery," with hawk-like eyes, and a mighty stride.

The world meant the distant landscape, blue hills, and smooth meadows, forests where fairies hid in fox-gloves, and gnomes made mansions of the trees.

Eric was thinking to-day about the world beyond Claythorpe, of possible towns over the hills, while a sudden thirst for travel and adventure stirred his soul.

A shadow on the path arrested his attention, he stopped swinging and looked down at a bare-footed boy, with a very brown face, trudging through the mud.

"Hulloa!" said Eric, by way of greeting.

The stranger halted, staring up astonished at the Rector's son, a striking contrast to the dark-eyed gipsy-boy, who answered, "Hulloa!" in a tone of mild surprise.

Eric, with his halo of fair curls framing a face half mischievous, half seraphic, made a picture worth remembering. His wide blue eyes twinkled like stars, he was so undeniably pretty even the ragged Tom gazed at him with open admiration.

"Where are you going?" asked Eric.

"Back to the caravan," replied Tom, nodding in the direction of a waste piece of ground where passing tribes of gipsies occasionally rested.

"Have you any cocoa-nuts?"



'A gate had been adopted by Eric as a swing.'

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and dates.

The question came eagerly, and received a nod of assent.

"Because," continued Eric, "I've got some pennies to spend. Once I gave father a cocoa-nut, and he was ever so much pleased. I should like to give him another. You see," added the little voice, gravely, "I've only father to consider; he and I are quite alone, so we take care of each other."

"Ain't you got no brothers and sisters?"

Eric shook his head.

"God did not want me to have any," he explained, "so it can't be helped."

He jumped off the gate, and rattled the loose coins proudly in the pocket of his white silk shirt. He was all in white, and looked to Tom like a little prince.

"You had better come along with me," said Tom, "and the Boss will give you the cocoa-nuts."

Eric willingly consented. His face wore a radiant expression as he marched beside the big boy.

As they came in sight of the caravan, Eric's heart beat faster with excitement.

"Doesn't it look lovely?" he exclaimed.

"Lovely?" queried Tom, with a hoarse laugh. "I guess it's pretty lovely when you know it as I do!"

"You must be very happy," murmured Eric.

Tom made no reply. They were close to the little encampment, and a great burly man with a black beard advanced to meet them.

Beyond him, seated on the caravan steps, a woman

with a red handkerchief over her head looked curiously towards Tom's companion. Even at a distance Eric felt the piercing gaze, as a small bird may feel the eye of an eagle afar off.

"Is she a witch?" asked the child in a whisper, putting his little fingers nervously on Tom's arm.

"That is my mother," he replied.

Eric's cheeks grew scarlet.

"Oh!—I—I beg your pardon," he stammered. "You see I am not very used to mothers, as I haven't one myself, so I sometimes make mistakes. It is very stupid of me."

To his relief Tom did not appear the least bit offended. Instead he presented him to the black-bearded man with quite a grand bow.

"This young gent wants to buy cocoa-nuts, Boss. He's got some coppers burning a hole in his pocket. Guess we can help him to get rid of them!"

"Stow your cheek, brat!" answered the man angrily. Then turning to Eric with a diabolical smile intended to be singularly prepossessing, he asked him to state his requirements. Eric put forward his modest request, received with an abrupt "Stay here," as the man sauntered towards the caravan.

The woman rose, addressing her husband in a whisper—

"Benjamin," she said, "that's the finest lad I've seen this many a long day."

"Fine feathers make fine birds," replied her spouse.

"I wasn't talking of the feathers," she muttered, shrugging her shoulders, "look at his face—he's real pretty—there's a little fortune in those eyes and curls. Who could resist him if he went out begging? Now Tom ain't a bit of good with that jowl, he don't touch the people. A shock of fair hair and straight features make money. What do you think?"

The woman looked up at her husband with an evil grin. He understood her meaning perfectly.

With a grunt and a nod, he answered: "You manage it!" strolling away in the opposite direction, whistling as he stared vacantly at the sky.

The woman hid her clay pipe, and advanced towards Eric, dropping a curtsy.

"Will you be pleased, sir, to step inside and choose the cocoa-nuts for yourself?" she said. "We've some beauties stowed away, just the finest cocoa-nuts in all the world."

Eric hesitated, uncertain how to reply. The woman's face frightened him. It was red, coarse, ugly, with a terribly long upper lip.

He could not quite forget his fancy about the witch. He had caught sight of the clay pipe when first they approached. A sudden instinct seized him to turn and run away. Then he remembered a sermon his father preached on cowardice at one of the children's services, and with an effort to be brave, Eric followed her nervously.

As they reached the steps, he paused again.

"I think, if you don't mind, I would like you to bring them out to me," he said, wavering like a fly on the brink of the spider's parlour. The woman, divining the child's good-nature, heaved a deep sigh.

"Just as you prefer, deary, but I'm that tired I don't know how to lift the box, and unless you pick 'em out yourself, my boy, they will be saying I've swindled you!"

Forgetting his fears, throwing prudence to the winds, Eric, with a quick "Please do not trouble!" skipped up the stairs, and vanished into the lion's den.

As the little white figure crossed the threshold, the door shut after him with a bang, while the black-bearded man ran forward leading the horses. In a moment they were ready for departure, trundling over the roads—away—away—to the cruel world beyond.

From within came the sound of a cry, followed by an path, and the thud of a heavy blow.

Tom shuddered, but dared not speak. His father lashed the horses, weary from long journeyings on dusty roads. Tom wondered if their feet ached like his own, blistered by the fierce sun.

The caravan had not passed through the village of Claythorpe, but skirted the houses and primitive shops unobserved, by way of a deserted lane. The witch, a woman of discernment, remembered this when she planned her theft.

"I think we are safe," she said, as she stared at the insensible child, lying stunned at her feet. "He ain't used to the fist!"



"Eric skipped up the stairs, and vanished into the lion's den."



CHAPTER II.

ERIC and Tom were seated on a doorstep outside a wretched house in an alley. This was Eric's first sight of London, where the bitter cold had driven the wandering tribe.

"I never thought London would be like this," he said, with a shiver.

The sad blue eyes looked at the squalid surroundings and fog-laden air with tears dimming them.

Since that awful day when he found himself entrapped, carried far from home and the parent he loved, Eric's mind seemed dazed by misery, while his shrunken frame told a pitiable tale of starvation. Yet pain by no means spoilt the delicate beauty of the sweet little face. The mouth drooped, forgetting how to smile, and the wide star-like eyes appeared larger as his face grew thinner. The cloud of gold hair alone remained unchanged, for cruel hands kept the halo well, though roughly, combed.

"It's the hair that makes the coin," said the witch-like woman, enigmatically.

By brutal force Tom's mother had succeeded in utterly cowing the stolen child. Violent blows soon taught him the wisdom of silence, and hunger alone became his master in the art of begging. Until he could procure a certain number of coins from the soft-hearted public, food was withheld, and Eric would plead for money with

such genuine pathos, that few could resist the flaxen-haired suppliant.

"He is just like an angel!" they frequently remarked, and the words brought a rush of colour invariably to the wan cheeks, for angels were associated in his mind with the old happy days, when father told him about Heaven.

Tom's mission in life, since Eric's advent, was that of policeman to the captured child. Never had Eric been allowed out alone since the day of his kidnapping, and Tom proved a kind though firm warder. Kind, because Eric's pure instincts touched his dwarfed soul; firm, since he dared not risk the prisoner's escape.

"If you was to run away, they'd kill me," Tom said.

"But wouldn't you be glad?" asked Eric, innocently. "I often wish I could die. Don't you see how much nicer Heaven must be?"

Tom made no reply; he only wrinkled his brow, old and furrowed for his years, letting his sharp chin rest on his knuckles. Eric, with childish logic, and exquisite faith in the exact Heaven of his own imagination, had all unconsciously cast a refining influence over Tom's rough nature.

Never before had the story of salvation been more simply taught, yet its very simplicity appealed to the untutored mind of the gipsy boy.

"I forgot," continued Eric, with a start of recollection, "I don't really want to die, because of father. Some day God will be sure to take me back to him. I expect we are both praying just the same prayer every night, and I am quite certain the answer must come soon."

"Does God always answer?" asked Tom.

Eric's fair head nodded reassuringly.

"I guess I'll miss you, little un," sighed Tom, drawing his small charge closer. "It's so nice to have a chap like you to talk to, you seem to know such a lot. Them hymns you say, they're mighty fine! Last night two lines kept running in my head:—

" 'Christain, dost thou see them,
On the holy ground?'

—"You see I'd been listening to father and that fellow who was waiting for him when we arrived. It never means no good when Bill Jones comes after father, so I kept one ear open, and heard everything they said. I don't think I should have minded before you came, but somehow now I looks on churches differently. Bill said there was a lot of money and valuable plate in a place of worship near by. I caught the name—'St. Saviour's.' The clergyman is away, but there's a stranger in charge. The alms-boxes are well-patronised—yes, that is the word he used. They expect a haul. Father is to break in alone. Bill won't take no risk that way, but he'll get rid of the plate afterwards. I wish father would be caught. I don't mind mother's beatings half so much, for I am nearly big enough to kick her back. But father is a regular terror, and I know he'll do for me one day, when the drink is' in him."

Eric listened paralysed. He clasped his cold hands fervently together, a sensation of horror gripping him.

"They are going to rob a church!" he gasped.

"Yes. I suppose that seems awful wicked to you, but a church means nothing to the likes of father and Bill Jones."

"Oh! but they mustn't do it," cried Eric, with tears in his eyes. "Can't we stop them, Tom?"

"There's no stopping father, when it's a matter of coin; but I had thought we might tip the parson a wink. Now you can write grand, and if we could leave a letter in the Church—warning him——"

Tom paused, staggered by the audacity of his own proposal. He waited to see how the words would effect Eric.

The little boy showed no surprise at the suggestion. He merely replied gravely:

"That is a very good idea of yours, Tom. But how are we to get writing things?"

Tom drew a dirty envelope out of his pocket, and exhibited it with pride.

"A lady gave me this, with some little paper books in it about God. I thought we might write on the back of one of the books."

As Tom spoke he produced from the recesses of another mysterious pocket a small end of pencil, which he damped between his lips for Eric's use.

"It does seem funny to write again," said Eric, his fingers trembling with excitement. "What shall I say?"

"Begin, 'Dear Mr. Clergyman,'" dictated Tom.

"But one never says 'Mr. Clergyman,'" protested Eric.



“ ‘ You won't get a mag for supper if you don't bring me some money.’ ”

"Am I making up this letter, or is you?" demanded Tom, severely. "I guess it's my job, young un, so fire away."

Eric meekly obeyed.

"Dear Mr. Clergiman," (wrote Eric). "Your church is going to be robbed tonight, so look sharp after the platt and arms boxes. You may tell the poliss if you like."

"How shall I finish?" asked the child.

"Oh! just put 'T.' at the end, that will mean me," said Tom. "If father finds out, I don't want you to be skinned alive."

Eric shivered as he signed the important document, which Tom hurriedly hid under his ragged coat.

The evening was closing in early, chill mists swept down upon the alley, a settled grey damp atmosphere hung like a cloud over London.

The witch-woman opened the door, and looked out at the children.

"What are you doing there," she asked, "wasting your time? You won't get a mag for supper if you don't bring me some money."

The boys rose to avoid a kick.

"All right, mother, we're going," said Tom, sullenly. She drew Eric back.

"Wait a minute!" she said, roughly passing a big comb through the cloud of fair hair.

Eric winced with pain.

"Keep out of the way of the bobbies," she cried, as a last word of warning.

The children left her without a word. There was that in their hearts which made the cold pinched faces determined, resolute, as they hurried down the alley, turning in the direction of St. Saviour's Church.

Eric thrilled with sudden joy at the thought of entering the sacred building. It was so home-like.

Tom kept tightly hold of Eric's hand, never forgetting his position of warder in the public thoroughfares. An idea had come to him that if father were safely in prison, he might restore his little charge to friends and safety. The thought of losing Eric brought a lump to Tom's throat ; as yet he could not bring himself to speak of this good intention.

With quick steps they covered the ground, not once pausing to beg, though blue-coated guardians of the peace were conspicuous by their absence.

At last the grey stone building loomed in sight, its spire lost in fog.

"Look," whispered Eric, "there are lights inside, that means they are having a service. Shall we try the vestry door, and if it is unlocked we could leave our letter on the table? The clergyman would be sure to see it."

Tom had never heard of a vestry, but Eric explained its uses. The younger boy was taking the lead now, church to him being familiar ground.

They opened the door without difficulty, and Eric, feeling quite at home, led the way, while Tom shuffled after him, glancing round uneasily. The strange room frightened Tom, it looked so clean and tidy.

Eric took the letter, laying it in a conspicuous position on the table.

"Oh, dear! I wish I could stay here for ever," sighed Eric, loth to leave; but Tom was full of fear.

"Come, we mustn't wait," he answered hoarsely, dragging Eric back to the door, which they had left ajar.

As he did so, the sound of a stealthy footstep on the flagstones without, made him start back, trembling.

"Some one is coming," he whispered, "quick, hide—or we shall be caught!"

They looked wildly round for shelter. Tom's terror of being found also infected Eric. On their right hung a long line of surplices, covered by a curtain. Behind these clerical garments the boys secreted themselves, two pairs of bright eyes peeping out to see the owner of the step which had driven them under cover.

A little gasp of terror escaped Tom, by which he all but betrayed his presence, simultaneously placing his hand over Eric's mouth to prevent further indiscretions. The sight which met their eyes set their hearts beating—froze their blood. A great black-bearded figure stood in the solemn precincts of St. Saviour's—the figure of Tom's father, big, massive, brutal, with fierce bloodshot eyes, glaring round at the blank walls.

A thousand petrifying thoughts passed through Tom's brain. His father had seen and followed them—he would find the letter, then all would be lost.

But the letter lay undisturbed, and instead the figure turned, advancing towards the curtain behind which the boys crouched.

148 **Fallen Amongst Thieves.**

Tom leant back close against the wall, nearly stifling Eric, over whom he drew the skirts of a long black cassock.

A moment of dread suspense, as the curtain shivered, a neighbouring surplice vibrated, and then Tom realised his father was hiding also—not a yard away.

Oh! the torture of that discovery. How could they now escape? Any moment, by a movement, a breath, they might betray themselves and fall into his hands. For the first time in his life, Tom's soul rose in prayer to God. He had heard little Eric praying often enough, and the child's example at last bore fruit.

As if in illustration of this sudden awakening, the words of the address reached to the vestry. The clergyman had a clear ringing voice, only Eric could not hear for the cassock smothering him.

"None of us liveth to himself," said the voice. "We must account to others for our thoughts, our actions, since we are connected by a thousand fibres with those around. We infect them every day—for good or evil; scattering the seeds of life—or of death. And the seeds may spring up—'after many days.' To those who have neither lived nor died in vain, shall be the reward of reaping in joy—he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together."

The preacher ceased, and the singing of an evening hymn brought the short week-day service to a close.

All unsuspecting of treachery, the clergyman entered the vestry, a tall slim man, with an expression of intense

weariness on the prematurely aged features, as if from some bitter trial too heavy for him to bear.

What grief could give his face such a look of yearning misery? Surely the hand of affliction must have fallen heavily upon those bent shoulders, that lined brow! He had evidently found the letter, for Tom could hear him opening the envelope. The boy wished he were able to see the clergyman's face as he read the contents, but only quickened breathing and hurried movements indicated something was amiss. Hurriedly he went into the church, striding down the aisle, past the now deserted pews, a bunch of keys in his hand, and the little letter next his heart. The writing was evidently a child's, and the recipient of that illiterate epistle imagined all children wrote alike. But the sight of the straggling fist, with the queerly shaped letters, set his pulses throbbing, and made his heart ache sorely. He had come to London to seek distraction from the torment of his own mind, with a vague idea of finding his lost son, whose strangely sudden disappearance had been known to the public as the "Claythorpe Mystery."

Carefully unlocking the alms-boxes, the Rev. Hugh Campbell collected the money, returning to count it out on the vestry table. The eyes of the black-bearded man watched him vulture-like from behind the curtain. Having written down the amount, Mr. Campbell proceeded to pack the consecrated silver, with the intention of removing it to a place of safety before sending for the police to watch the building.

As he prepared to depart, well laden with spoil, his back turned towards the curtain, the looker-on with the evil eyes and raven hair sprang from his hiding-place. A pair of strong hands grasped Mr. Campbell's throat from behind, and a desperate struggle ensued. To and fro swayed the fighting forms in deadly combat, for the clergyman was a muscular Christian, despite a frame wasted by long weeks of anxiety. At one time it seemed possible he would shake off his assailant, but the burly gipsy proved too strong. Mr. Campbell saw before him certain death—the end of the journey suddenly overtaking him in the very midst of life; and though he had lost all he held most dear, a burning desire to live rose like a flame within his soul. There was still so much to be done, his work for humanity looked to him now all too incomplete. Oh, for a little more time before facing the great Judge!

Through gathering mists of agony he saw a vision of his lost child—little Eric, with a white face of terror, and wild dishevelled curls.

The villain's clutch relaxed, for a moment he seemed off his guard, then the flash of steel gleamed between them. As the cruel blade flashed aloft, Tom and Eric simultaneously pounced from the rear, tripping up the enemy, so that he fell with a crash headlong upon his own knife.

Senseless he lay in a pool of blood, prostrate on the vestry floor, while Tom bent over him with a quick "He's breathing right enough! It would take more than that to kill father!"

As Tom removed the knife, he looked up, startled by a cry of joy. The Rev. Hugh Campbell knelt on the ground with both arms flung protectingly round Eric.

The sight of their happiness was too much for Tom. Brushing his eyes with his sleeve, he turned his head away.

He heard the quick words of love which poured from Eric's lips, he knew that father and child were re-united.

In startling contrast he looked down at his own parent, and wiped the blood from the swarthy brow, with the tenderness of a woman.

Tom little guessed how much this evening meant for him—a future of prosperity in Eric's happy home, the opening out of fresh fields, new pastures.

The words of the preacher were destined to be prophetic, and the unconscious influence of a child's pure nature brought forth, for the sower and reaper alike, a harvest of joy.

THE HAUNTED YEWS.

“ IRED?”

“Yes, very. What a confession to make to my hostess!”

“Your face first made the confession.”

“Yes; but, my dear Barbara, you should pity me. I am suffering from nerves—it’s horrible! I don’t know how I have managed to drag through the season. Arthur did not want to leave town till the Parliamentary recess, but last week he grew suddenly frightened about my health, so we are going to Lichen Hall to-morrow for absolute quiet. No house party this summer—by doctor’s orders—rural simplicity, early hours, a sort of rest-cure, in fact.”

“Is Denise in town with you?”

“No, I think children are better in the country. I left her with a governess at Lichen Hall, where she runs wild to her heart’s content. Her holidays begin to-morrow—poor little Denise, she is simply longing for our return.”

Barbara Annesley, who would not willingly have parted with her own children for a single day, looked

critically at the nervous, fair-haired woman, with the wide, blue eyes and sensitive mouth. Marian Howard was known as a beauty, but lately she had lost her lovely colouring through ill-health, and the vivacious society woman was now languid and tired-looking.

"The country will do you good, Marian," said Barbara, with that cheerfulness so frequently adopted by healthy women towards their weaker sisters. "Nerves are frequently imagination, the result of hysteria. You have overtaxed your strength, but you will soon pick up again."

Mrs. Howard smiled wanly. The buzz of conversation wearied her. She thought, with a sense of relief, that to-morrow she would be far away from the hum of the busy world, in the dear old ivy-covered house standing in its great, grand gardens, with the sombre fir trees, pale fountains, and frowning yews.

Barbara turned to her other guests, a fresh voice occupying Marian Howard's attention.

"Is it true that Lichen Hall has the reputation of being haunted?" asked Miss Fowkes, a long-necked individual, heavily laden with barbaric ornaments.

"Oh, yes; all the village people believe firmly in our haunted grove, an avenue of trees much frequented by ghosts. Even my little girl, Denise, has grown up rooted and grounded in the family superstition. She hardly dares to look out of the window on moonlight nights for fear of seeing an apparition!"

"Ah!" murmured Miss Fowkes, "that comes of leav-

ing children too much to themselves; the servants tell such silly stories. I hear your little girl is quite sweet, so pretty and bright."

"You heard that? Well, I am not surprised; it is one of the reasons why I do not bring Denise to London. People talk about her, and I am afraid she may grow conceited. At present she is absolutely natural—has not an idea she is even pretty. It is a great charm in a child."

"Yes," said Miss Fowkes, thoughtfully. "I wondered how you could part with her for months at a time, but perhaps you are right."

Miss Fowkes found herself interrupted by the entrance of the men, of whom the majority drifted towards Mrs. Howard. It was a fashion to consider her beautiful under any circumstance. Very agreeable and very clever she certainly proved, yet on that last evening of her London treadmill she bore some resemblance to those portraits which wear an eternal smile.

The gates of Lichen Hall were set wide open, and in the twilight following a brilliant summer afternoon a carriage passed up the haunted grove, so named for centuries by the Howard ancestors. Denise, in a white frock, her picturesque little face framed by curls of burnished copper, waited excitedly on the steps.

Her eyes sparkled as they caught the first glimpse of the carriage; her feet moved impatiently, as if eager to dance an impromptu *pas de seul*; her voice sounded breathless as she gasped the single word, "Mother!"

The pale lady in the carriage flushed as she strained the child to her heart. They made a pretty picture, the lovely miniature of the once lovelier woman, lip to lip—Denise trembling with joy as she disentangled herself in order to give her father a welcome hug.

"It is so nice, your coming back—alone—just you two!" said Denise, as she tripped after them into the house. "I shall have you all to myself for once. Last summer we got no time for nice long talks, did we, mother?"

"No, dear," replied Mrs. Howard, with a sigh, as she thought of the fatigues of the previous year, when Royalty had been entertained at Lichen Hall.

It did not strike Denise to wonder why there was no house party, till her father remarked upon his wife's health.

"Mother has been doing too much lately, Denise," he said. "You must take great care of her. I shall constitute you nurse. How would the *rôle* suit Miss Merrylegs?"

Denise looked at her mother's tired face. She put her gentle little fingers against the faded cheeks, and stroked them ever so softly.

"Are you ill?" she asked, and the bright eyes dimmed at the mere idea.

"Not really ill—only silly!" laughed Mrs. Howard. "I dream more than is good for me, and wake with a bad headache. The country is going to cure all that."

"Oh!" said Denise, earnestly. "I hope you won't see the ghost!"

The thought struck her suddenly ; the words slipped out.

"My dear, the ghost is a humbug ; nobody ever sees it, because there is nothing to see," replied Mrs. Howard, reassuringly.

"But Charlotte saw it only last night," Denise continued, mysteriously, "and she had a terrible fit of hysterics in the kitchen. She went out to look for the yellow kitten, which we thought was lost—she forgot about the haunted grove, till suddenly she saw a dark figure creeping along the ground and vanishing into the monk's tree!"

"Don't let me ever hear such nonsense again," said Mr. Howard, quite sternly. "The servants have no right to tell you these absurd stories. Be sure, Denise, there is not a word of truth in them!"

A pensive look came in the child's eyes, something which would have told a keen observer that Denise still believed. Small wonder, considering the lonely months passed, without parents or childish companions, at Lichen Hall. She was afraid to own with what dread the thought of the haunted grove possessed her. Never had she dared walk alone under the shade of those noted yew trees after dusk, since they held a thousand terrors.

Rumours of spiritual visitants lurking beneath the dark branches and vanishing into the gnarled trunks infected her with their contagion, filling the child's innocent soul with unhealthy fear. She was environed by a superstitious atmosphere which touched, enfolded, and marred her young life.

As she did not answer, Mr. Howard thought she had forgotten, and no further allusion was made to the apparition seen by Charlotte.

The following morning Denise learnt that her father had received an important business telegram summoning him to London.

"I shall only be away one night," he said to the child, drawing her aside and speaking in low, confidential tones. "I want you, Denise, to take great care of mother; be with her as much as ever you can, and promise me you will sleep with her. If she seems restless, or in any way frightens you, call her maid at once—you have a lot of sense for your age, I think I can trust you."

Denise put up her face and kissed him, as if to seal the promise, and whispered, fervently:—

"Oh! I'll take such great, great care, you don't know! I'll be ever so careful!"

She noticed he looked worried and her mother seemed upset. He whispered reassuring words as she blinked back a tear at parting, ashamed of her weakness. Almost the first request she made to Denise after he drove away re-echoed Mr. Howard's last injunction:—

"You will sleep with me to-night, Denise?"

"Oh! yes. I promised papa."

"So he asked you?"

Denise nodded, and at the same time wrinkled her brow. What had he meant by those mysterious words:

"Or in any way frightens you"? She wished she had asked him, for now it was too late. She remembered he hesitated, as if he had more to say, then seemed to change his mind and closed his lips again.

All that day Denise remained like a helpful little shadow by her mother's side. Usually given to running about, climbing trees, and generally playing tom-boy, this enforced quiet proved a strange effort. But the child kept a firm hold upon herself, and watched for the smallest opportunity of doing her mother service.

"Come and sit down," said Mrs. Howard, as they strolled in the garden after tea. "I love this old seat by the monk's tree."

She led Denise to a lichen-covered bench under one of the frowning yews.

"Doesn't the house look sweet from here? You would not like to give it up, Denise—you would not like to be obliged to go away?"

"Oh, no——"

A very genuine note rang in the child's reply.

"We love it so, don't we, Denise? But it is just possible we may have to sell the dear old place—if things go wrong. We shall know to-morrow. It is all about money, a law-suit, to be decided immediately. The anxiety has preyed on my mind, though your father is quite confident of success."

"Poor mamma," whispered Denise. "You must not sit here if you are sad. This is where Charlotte saw the black figure. Let us go back to the rose garden."

Mrs. Howard smiled.

"Are you really frightened of these funny, quaint trees? It's such nonsense, you know."

"Everybody is frightened—except you and papa," replied Denise, in self-defence. "The village people always use the other path—they call this the devil's entrance."

"Very rude of them! I don't invite devils to Lichen Hall."

"No, but they come uninvited, and that's the bother of it," said Denise, gravely, as she coaxed her mother away to a more congenial spot.

Denise did not sleep easily that night, though the soft air blowing through the open window kept the room deliciously cool. She watched her mother fall into deep slumber before she allowed herself to close an eyelid, then the voices of the nightingales outside grew hushed, and Denise also slept.

Some hours elapsed, time drifted, then she woke suddenly, a flood of moonlight falling full upon her face. The blind had not been drawn, and the pale rays gave the room a singularly ghostly appearance.

"The light will wake mamma," she thought; "I must pull the curtains, I must shut it out."

With this intention Denise stole on tiptoe to the open window. She thought involuntarily of the sombre yew trees with their gloomy verdure silvered by the moon. Through summer, through winter—ever the same, they

seemed devoid of sensitiveness, hard, mysterious, unfeeling!

Denise, shivering slightly with fear, yet emboldened by the knowledge that her mother was with her in the room, peeped cautiously at the bright garden lying so silently under the stars. Her eyes strayed from the gay flower-beds sending up their mingled odours to the dark grove, and as they did so a chill blast stirred the dishevelled curls framing her terrified face.

Beneath the dark line of waving boughs a tall, white figure moved slowly—a pale, transparent form—which seemed to carry the light along with it. Denise could see loose strands of hair, like that of a human being, floating from the creature's upright head. It glided like a moonbeam, as if wafted by the faint breeze.

With a cry of terror Denise hid her eyes and, rushing wildly to the bed, flung herself down with her face to the pillows.

"It's there! It's there! I saw it!" she found herself moaning aloud before she realized she was betraying her father's trust. Then, pulling herself together, she looked up quickly to discover if she had disturbed her charge. She looked, but could see nothing—she felt with both hands—she called to her mother, but the room was empty—Mrs. Howard had disappeared!

An idea came to Denise in that moment of terror which sent her running back to the window, with her heart thumping like a steam-engine. The white figure took a familiar form in her mind's eye, and she looked

for it now with an equal sense of alarm, though her fear was of a different kind.

Yes—now there could be no mistake, the pale wanderer she had mistaken for an apparition was a flesh-and-blood woman—her own mother—out alone in the solitary garden at midnight.

Denise watched her slowly vanishing down the haunted grove, at the end of which lay a broad lake. Where was she going and why was she up? Evidently she had not wished Denise to know. It was all very mystifying! And, oh! how could she walk under those terrible yews? The child experienced a great thrill of admiration as she thought of her mother's courage, knowing personally that she herself would never have dared.

But even as these thoughts passed with their vivid sensations a fresh idea came to Denise. Her father had told her to stay with mamma, to take care of her, to be with her as much as possible, and clear along the path of duty stood the haunted grove, the deserted moonlit garden, with its mysterious legends!

Oh, no, no; of course she need not follow; she would hide her head under the bedclothes and wait till her mother came back. Physical terror spoke the smooth words, but stern reality echoed her promise, "I'll take such great, great care; I'll be ever so careful!"

For some moments she stood battling with cowardice, struggling to muster courage. To face the unseen foes of darkness seemed a petrifying task for the nervous, overwrought child, and her very fear made Denise doubly



"A small hand grasped her arm."

—

a heroine, as she mastered self, obeying her nobler instincts.

Braving the terrors of the night, the little white-robed figure ran noiselessly down the broad staircase, across the hall, paved in black and white marble, over numerous Turkey rugs, passed an old Indian lac screen to a narrow doorway leading into the garden. A stream of moonlight told her this door stood open; in another moment she would be crossing the dreaded ground, running swiftly in her mother's footsteps.

Hesitation meant retreat, so Denise rushed blindly forward, hardly conscious of the cold air blowing on her bare neck and fluttering the thin, white gown. She held her breath as she neared the monk's tree, keeping her eyes cast down, quite sure she would have seen something supernatural had she ventured to glance round.

Denise flew like lightning, for at the end of the grove she overtook the wanderer, whose feet were on the brink of the lake, just as a small hand grasped her arm, drawing her gently back.

"What are you doing, mamma?" Denise asked, in a whisper.

She looked up as she spoke into the vacant face. The unanswering eyes, the rigid features, told their own story. Denise guessed in that painful moment what had happened: her mother was sleep-walking, and for this reason needed guarding with the greatest caution. This, then, explained those mysterious words; "If she in any way frightens you!"

"I am glad I came by myself," thought the wise little Denise. "Mother would not have liked anyone else to see."

She put her arms round Mrs. Howard without waking her, leading her back under the shade of the yews. Quite slowly they walked, each rustle of the leaves overhead making the child's heart beat faster.

As they reached the lichen-covered bench Mrs. Howard sighed deeply, and, drawing away from Denise, seated herself under the monk's tree, with folded hands.

It was the very spot of all others which petrified the child, but she kept her presence of mind.

"Poor mother wants to rest a few moments," she told herself. "How lucky I stopped her from falling in the lake; it would have made her so very wet and cold."

Denise did not realize she had in all probability saved Mrs. Howard's life. She stood patiently by the haunted tree, in which the wraith of a sinful monk was supposed to have enshrined itself, her gaze fixed upon the old house, the much-loved home whose fate hung in the balance.

Was she dreaming? Could she believe her eyes? Someone was surely standing by the open door at the side of the house—a man, holding a lantern. Denise watched curiously. That was no ghost, but a human form, in ordinary dark clothing. But why was he there at such an hour? A moment later and a second figure joined him, a very short man, almost a dwarf, carrying a basket which seemed familiar to Denise. She

looked again, and as she did so the moon burst from under a thin, white cloud, shedding its full light upon surrounding objects. Yes, the basket was one Denise knew well: it belonged to the pantry, and contained silver.

A sudden idea struck her. These men were robbing her house, these thieves had the audacity——

She did not wait to consider further, for the thought set her blood boiling. No living creature could make Denise afraid; the nervous child trembling at a shadow was a perfect lioness when real danger threatened and her parents' interests suffered.

With arms upraised, as if denouncing vengeance, the romantic little form sprang from the shade of the grove, speeding like a lapwing towards her enemies. The men saw her—saw, too, the motionless woman seated under the monk's tree and never doubted for a moment the gruesome stories of the haunted avenue.

As Denise advanced they retreated in fear, but, looking back, the moonlight showed them the white child following, gaining on their steps.

The horror of her presence shattered nerve and reason. Dropping the spoil, they vaulted a gate and made away across the fields, leaving the garden of phantoms far behind.

"They knew I meant to hurt them, said Denise, as she stooped down to gather the scattered silver carefully into the basket. "I would have killed them if I could."

To carry the stolen goods back to the house was no

light matter, and Denise staggered under the weight of the plate-basket, her face crimson with the effort, her forehead moist, her teeth set. More than once she stumbled and fell, cutting her knees on the gravel, but returned with fresh zeal to her task, determined not to be baffled.

As she reached the open door she saw her mother, still wrapt in slumber, slowly moving towards the house. Together they entered, the calm, statuesque woman and the hot, exhausted child panting slowly after her, with strained and aching arms.

Back, up the wide staircase, into the moonlit room, a silent little heroine, in no way proud of saving life and property, fell half-fainting on her mother's bed.

Thus she lay, her hands still clutching the handle of the heavy basket, listening to Mrs. Howard's even breathing, which seemed to mingle with her own loud heart-beats.

When day dawned, and the delicious breath of an early summer morning stirred fresh life in the child's pulses, Denise crept forth again at the first sound of the housemaid busy in the passage. The child looked very pale as she deposited a burden of silver before Charlotte's astonished eyes.

"I thought this plate-basket wasn't very safe downstairs, so I brought it up. It got dropped, and the things are all in a muddle; that was my fault. You might tell Johnson mother and I left the side door open; it was rather hot in the night, so we went for a stroll."



Before Charlotte could answer Denise darted back to her mother's room, where she waited for Mrs. Howard to wake.

"Mother must never know," thought Denise; "it would only frighten her."

There was joy at Lichen Hall. It seemed as if an angel with glittering rainbow wings had come with a gift straight from Heaven—yet the angel after all only wore the prosaic garb of a telegraph boy, carrying a yellow envelope.

Mrs. Howard opened the message with trembling fingers, and Denise peeped over her shoulder. Then the sun burst through the mist of doubt, and each one knew the dear old home was safe—the malicious enemy had been conquered!

Two radiant faces awaited Mr. Howard at the station, while he, equally elated, waved his hat out of the window before the train had time to stop and allow Denise to fly into his arms.

A happy trio drove back through the country lanes, with so much to say to each other that even the beauty of the summer twilight escaped them.

As they passed the haunted grove Denise glanced disdainfully at the monk's tree.

"The ghosts are all a fraud," she told herself, "or they would never have let us sit there last night without doing something unpleasant."

Denise dined with her parents that evening and drank

prosperity to the old home in what she called "fizzy wine."

After dinner she begged her father to come into the garden just to look at the yews by moonlight.

Under the shade of their sombre branches she told him, quite simply, the tale of her night's daring, the adventures of which her mother was blissfully unconscious.

Denise could not see his face as she listened, but she never forgot the kiss he gave her as she concluded the story with a stifled yawn.

"You know you told me to take great care of mother," she said, "and I'm just a little sleepy, for—you see, it was rather a long sort of night."

Her head fell wearily on his shoulder.

"I feel so safe now," she whispered as he carried her in to bed.

THE BROWN SPRITE.

CHAPTER I.

ROWENA was busily digging with her minute spade in a long border of marigolds.

Near by sat Mrs. Barry under the shade of an old catalpa tree. A very pretty gardener Rowena made, her holland smock picturesquely begrimed with wholesome earth.

The sound of a carriage in the drive turned the child's attention from her task. She dropped her little spade to watch with interest an old-fashioned yellow chariot, which drew up in front of the hall door.

An aged lady alighted, wearing a black lace-curtained bonnet, and voluminous sombre draperies. Her face was so wrinkled that the original features seemed creased out of recognition.

Mrs. Barry advanced to greet her visitor.

"I was sitting in the garden, Signora," she said, "but perhaps you would rather be indoors."

The black bonnet waggled an emphatic dissent.

"The garden is more to my liking, dear Edith; the sun to-day reminds me of Italy—my Italy! Monk's

Home is a dreary dwelling—damp, dark! But I do not like to leave the place where my poor husband lived and died.”

The old lady paused, fixing her sharp eyes upon Rowena.

“I have not seen your little daughter for some months, my health has kept me a prisoner,” said the low voice. “Come here, *bambina*,” beckoning Rowena, “and kiss your grandmother.”

“You are not my grandmother,” replied the child, “but I don’t mind kissing you.”

“It’s a pretty angel, truly,” Signora Ronzio, whispered to Mrs. Barry. “Nothing cheers me like the presence of little people. Since Humbert grew to be a man I have missed the sound of young voices; there is nothing to attract children to Monk’s Home.”

“Are you coming to help me dig?” asked Rowena.

“No,” said the old lady, “but perhaps you will come and dig in my garden, if your *madre* will let you.”

“I’ll come if I need not stay very long,” said Rowena, with the embarrassing candour of childhood.

“One night—will you stay one night?” Signora Ronzio put the question eagerly, as if a great matter hung in the balance.

“How soon?” asked the child.

“To-day. Drive home with me now, and I will bring you back to-morrow.”

Rowena looked startled. Her eyes travelled nervously to the gaudy chariot with the big white horses, then

sought again the wrinkled face in its heavy black bonnet. With youth's quickness those happy blue eyes read keen anxiety and yearning in the Signora's features.

Instinct told Rowena that if she drew back she would cause suffering.

Ashamed of her misgiving, she nodded a smiling acquiescence.

"Do you really want Rowena?" asked Mrs. Barry, surprised.

Signora Ronzio looked pleadingly at the young mother.

"Yes, truly! I need distraction. I am in much trouble."

Mrs. Barry bent down to Rowena.

"Run indoors and tell nurse you are going away for the night. She must pack your things, and dress you in a clean frock."

Rowena half hoped Mrs. Barry would object, but regretted her hope on catching the Signora's expression of joy.

"You are very good," she heard the old lady say to her mother.

"I am sorry for your trouble, whatever it may be," murmured Mrs. Barry.

"You could not understand my suffering! You know my son Humbert. Every drop of blood in his veins is pure Italian, and it has been my wish that he should take a wife of his own nationality."

"But surely you will find some difficulty in fulfilling your wish," said Mrs. Barry. "Humbert has been born

and bred in England ; is it not likely he may lose his heart to some fair Britisher ! ”

“ I thought of that, and wrote my fears to my ever kind friend, Queen Margherita. She has appointed Humbert her godson, to a good position at Court. He is to leave for Italy to-morrow night, but, alas ! already he has set his affections on Amorel Meade, a London girl, who keeps herself by painting pictures. He tells me she is well born and highly talented ; they love each other to distraction. He protests that having money of his own, I am doing them both a grievous wrong by standing in their light ! I tell him in return, the Ronzios have never mingled their blood with foreigners.”

Mrs Barry’s sympathy drifted from the older woman to the young romantic couple, conscious only of their heart’s longing.

“ How will it all end ? ” asked Mrs. Barry.

The Signora shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of despair.

“ To-night may decide. He is determined I shall meet her before he leaves England. I expect them both this evening. It is possible I may be able to frighten the young woman into giving him up by telling her the story of the curse. Girls are often superstitious ; I shall read her the family legend. There is an old motto of our house, which translated runs thus :

If a Ronzio wed not his own kin,
His marriage will bring forth both death and sin.”

Mrs. Barry smiled.

"I do not think such stories will affect the mind of a wholesome English girl;" she said.

"But surely as you are not to be alone to-night, you cannot want Rowena."

"A child is very useful sometimes," replied the Signora enigmatically. "At awkward times the little people put us at our ease, and save many an unpleasant situation. You have promised to spare her; do not disappoint me now!"

The old lady rose, for a small figure in a white dress had appeared on the doorstep.

"It's a very big carriage just for two people, isn't it?" Rowena remarked to a cheerful looking woman bearing a minute box which resembled a doll's portmanteau. "I wish you were coming with me, Nanny. Shall I ask the Signora if you may come too?"

The little fingers tightened over Nanny's hand, but the woman had heard strange rumours of uncanny happenings at Monk's House, and felt no desire to accompany her young mistress.

"It would be very rude to ask," she replied hurriedly, and giving the small box to the footman retreated with speed, leaving Rowena alone.

A sense of faintness stole over the child as she saw Signora Ronzio approaching with her mother.

Even now it was not too late to burst into tears and refuse to go, but Rowena battled against the inclination, allowing herself to be lifted into the carriage without the quiver of an eyelid.

She looked back and waved to her mother as the yellow chariot rumbled down the drive.

"Funny little thing!" thought Mrs. Barry. "I was quite surprised she wanted to go."

CHAPTER II.

ROWENA and the old lady were solemnly taking tea together in a verandah at the back of the house. The trellis work, covered by a rambling vine, shut out the rays of the fading sun, while an open window showed the interior of a gloomy oak-panelled room, dark furniture, dark wall-paper, heavy winter curtains, and tiger-skin rugs on the floor.

Rowena, seated on a small chair, munching a slice of very stodgy cake, turned every now and again to look at the fierce faces of the wild beasts. They seemed to her alive and ready to spring; there was something evil in their glassy eyes.

"I want to prepare a little surprise for my son this evening," said the Signora smiling. "It is his birthday, and I thought it would be such fun to play at a fairy tale, and to pretend that a dear little fairy brought him his birthday present. Will you help me, Rowena?"

The child became interested at once.

"Am I to be the fairy?" she asked, "and shall I wear wings with spangles on them like the lady in the pantomime?"

Her cheeks glowed at the thought ; she forgot to finish the stodgy cake.

"No, you must be dressed as a funny little gnome. You are so small you will look as if you had come out of a rabbit-hole in the warren near by. I have been making a lovely suit of brown paper, with a mask for your face, and a cowl."

Rowena leant forward, resting her face on her tiny hands.

"Will brown paper be pretty?" she asked doubtfully.

"Well, we shall see—perhaps not—but then it will be nearly dark! I shall tell you exactly what to do, but Humbert must never know you have been here. If everything goes well, I shall give you a big toy cart and horse, with a new doll to ride in the cart."

Rowena caught her breath.

"Oh! you *are* kind!" she gasped. "But would you really be able to afford so many toys all at once?"

"Yes, certainly. Why not? Do you think I am very poor?"

There was a note of offence in the Signora's voice.

"Yes, I thought you must be because you were making a fairy's dress out of brown paper. I supposed it was to save money."

"Then you supposed wrong!" retorted the Signora sharply.

Rowena felt snubbed.

"I will tell you more later," continued her hostess. "Minnie will look after you, she is a nice girl, and has

been used to children. Don't tell her about our plan, we must keep that secret. The nursery has been prepared for you. Ah, me! no one has slept in it for ten years."

Rowena sat patiently for a while, then she began to fidget. This was not her idea of "playing at a fairy tale," and she found the proceedings somewhat slow.

"Will Minnie come soon?" she asked plaintively.

"Yes, you can ring the bell," replied the Signora with a start, recalled by the small voice.

Rowena was glad when Minnie came and bore her away to the distant nursery, a deserted chamber at the top of the house.

In the meanwhile Signora Ronzio congratulated herself upon maturing an elaborate plan.

"The child will be easily hoodwinked," she told herself, a sly smile crossing her withered face.

The house was but dimly lighted when Amorel arrived, and her heart sank at the old lady's chilly reception.

Humbert had assured Amorel it would be "all right." His dear old *madré* was only "a bit superstitious," and wanted him to marry an Italian, because of some "stupid family prejudîce." So he induced her to come and put matters straight between them.

For a moment Signora Ronzio was taken off her guard by the great beauty of the girl, and her son's affectionate greeting, but, remembering this same beauty had been the cause of Humbert's downfall, she froze again quickly, eyeing Amorel with distrust.

What mattered it that this radiant young creature had sweet soft eyes, and an undeniable air of breeding about

her? Was she not an Englishwoman to her very marrow, and therefore unsuited to carry on the long line of dark-skinned Ronzios, with Italy's fire in their veins?

"Strange things have occurred, Humbert," she said, "since first you wrote to me of Miss Meade. The sprite has been singularly busy."

"What is the sprite?" asked Amorel, curiously.

"It is a name we have given our family ghost, who becomes restive when disaster threatens the house of Ronzio. The ghost takes the form of a monster or goblin. This horrible little apparition has recently appeared between the garden and the churchyard, where my husband lies buried. I fear it augurs trouble, and comes to warn my son against a rash engagement."

"I am not a believer in ghosts," said Amorel, simply.

"Nor I," retorted Humbert. "One hears of this tiresome imp appearing at the death-beds of the Ronzio ancestors, or if not actually appearing, scratching and whining at the door, making himself generally disagreeable. When I see with my own eyes I will credit the story, not before."

The Signora made it quite clear to Amorel that as a daughter-in-law she would not be welcome, and hoped when Humbert left for Italy the following day, the girl would agree to try and forget him. Furthermore, on being told this was impossible, she extracted a promise from both that they would cease to correspond for a year. It somewhat surprised the Signora to receive a ready assent to her stern request.

The lugubrious conversation was beginning to tell on

Amorel's nerves, for she noticed by degrees it affected Humbert; he seemed uneasy, and started at every sound.

"I daresay you would enjoy a little talk alone with Humbert," the old lady said, late in the evening, after a somewhat one-sided argument on the impolicy of mixed marriages. "Come with me, I will take you to the smoking-room. I promised him this before dinner, as it is his last night in England. May I hope you will try and overcome this ill-judged affection, and agree to part like sensible young people?"

"I shall do whatever Humbert wishes," replied Amorel, and her voice faltered.

Signora Ronzio led the way to that dreary apartment at the back of the house, off the verandah. In front of the window heavy curtains were drawn, a single lamp burnt low, shaded in crimson, the very light for lovers.

Amorel sank with a sigh of relief into a low chair near the curtains.

"I am growing quite nervous," said Amorel, "your mother has depressed and frightened me."

Humbert placed his arms protectingly round the slim girlish figure.

"*Madre* in her present mood is enough to frighten anyone," he answered. "I saw at once it was no use telling her our plans for to-morrow. I have not trusted the special license out of my pocket for a moment! In less than twenty-four hours we shall be on our way to Italy together, then let the sprite do what he pleases, the little pest!"

They had almost forgotten the grim story of the sprite when a slight rustling of the curtains attracted Amorel's attention.

"What's that?" she whispered.

"A slight draught," he answered, assuming a careless tone, but nevertheless his eyes fixed themselves somewhat uneasily upon the heavy draperies.

As if by common consent they ceased speaking, the consciousness of a third presence in the room making itself felt in both their hearts. With a swift movement the curtains parted, something small and alive stood before them, a brown formless form, which raised a pair of tiny arms, dropping a piece of square white marble with a thud on the floor. The curtains fell together again and the vision was gone.

Humbert started forward to follow the sprite or ghost, but Amorel clung to him tremblingly.

"Don't leave me—for God's sake!" she gasped, shaking from head to foot. As she spoke she picked up the small block of marble, on which was inscribed in red letters the one word—"Death!"

"Look Humbert!"

He took it from her, paling to his very lips.

"This is one of the marble stones that border my father's grave; they were picked pieces brought from Italy."

Amorel covered her face.

"Your mother said the—the creature had been seen between the garden and the churchyard. You too,

Humbert, declared you would believe—when you saw with your own eyes. I am an interloper, and shall only bring misery upon you!”

She burst into tears. In vain he pleaded. The terrified girl refused consolation. With her eyes still wet, she bade him good-night, and there was that in her tone which meant “good-bye.”

Signora Ronzio guessed her plan had succeeded as she conducted Amorel to her room, leaving Humbert down-cast, wretched, with the white block of marble, the red “Death,” and the thought of the curse burning into his soul.

Well contented with her night’s work, the Signora went happily to bed.

But the child could not sleep; she had been disappointed in the game. It seemed to her such a strange birthday present, that heavy piece of stone which the Signora called “a handsome letter weight for her dear son’s writing-table.” The dear son certainly failed to show any delight when the brown imp appeared, and the pretty lady looked oh, so frightened. Even the thought of the promised toys did not ease little Rowena’s mind.

She began to mistrust the old Signora, who hustled her off to bed with feverish haste, and bade her say nothing to the servants.

“If I could see the pretty lady and tell her it was only a game,” thought the child; “then she would not be frightened any more.” It was no use trying to sleep

while her mind felt wide awake, and her conscience pricked. What if she had done something wrong? What if the Signora were, after all, as wicked as a witch, working an evil spell?

The child sprang up, quivering in every nerve. Gently she opened the nursery door. All was dark and still. She crept to the top of the stairs; below a faint light glimmered, and the sight encouraged her. She made straight for the room in which she had last seen Humbert and Amorel.

Rowena opened the door softly. Evidently the Signora and the pretty lady had retired for the night. Humbert sat alone, his head buried in his hands. The child advanced on tip-toe.

"Are you crying?" she asked gently.

Humbert started, and stared at her amazed.

"Good gracious! it's the little Barry girl!" he said.

Rowena nodded.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked, her height and size suddenly suggesting to his mind the possibility of a trick.

"I came on a visit because the Signora wanted me; and I meant to make you so happy when I brought your birthday present. I could not read the red letters; she told me they spelt 'dearest.' I was playing at being a fairy. I am very sorry if I frightened you."

For a moment Humbert could not speak. So it was thus his mother had deceived him, and sought to rob him of his bride.

"You frightened Amorel bitterly!" he said; "but it was not your fault. Stay, and I will write her a letter—if you will be postman and carry the note to her room.

Rowena was all excitement. He had evidently a great deal to say, for his pen flew across the paper, only once pausing, while he looked in the Bradshaw.

"Will this make her quite happy?" asked Rowena, as he showed the way to a door on the first storey.

"I hope so. You must bring me an answer—yes, or no. I will wait at the end of the landing?"

Humbert watched the silvery course of the moon as he listened anxiously to hear Amorel's door re-open, impatient for the return of "love's messenger."

Presently the small white figure of Rowena stole like a moonbeam along the passage. "Amorel says 'yes,'" whispered the child; "and she told me to give you this from her."

As Rowena spoke she pulled his face down, and, standing on tip-toe, kissed the dark moustache.

A flood of colour rushed to the man's face; he murmured "thank God!" under his breath.

"I am going to sleep with her," said Rowena proudly, "because I am afraid of being alone, and she is a little afraid too. Shall I give her back a kiss from you?"

"Yes, a hundred!" he whispered, smoothing the bright curls before going out towards the stables.

* * * * *

When Rowena awoke the following morning the clock

was striking six, and Amorel, despite the early hour, stood dressed and ready for travelling.

"Are you going away?" asked Rowena.

"Yes—away from this dark house, and the old witch-woman," answered Amorel brightly. "See how the sun shines—this is my wedding morning!"

Rowena looked out of the window. At the foot of a short drive she could see a closed carriage awaiting the runaways.

"I don't want to be left with the Signora, said Rowena, clinging to Amorel, tears starting in her eyes. "Can't I come with you? Won't you send me home in your carriage?"

Amorel's warm heart felt for the child. Why should Rowena stay to bear the blame? Amorel's eyes positively danced with mischief as, snatching up a big rug from the sofa, she enveloped the tiny figure in its folds.

A gentle tap came at the door. "Carry this parcel downstairs for me, Humbert," she whispered, "and put it in the carriage."

A few words of explanation and the little party of deserters passed noiselessly out of Monk's Home, while the old Signora, undisturbed by her hardened conscience, lay snoring in "Counterpane-Land."

"I shall just get home in time to share mother's early cup of tea," said Rowena.

Amorel laughed.

"How surprised your mother will be! When you say

The Brown Sprite.

your prayers this morning, Rowena, will you add: 'God bless Humbert and Amorel on their wedding day?'

The child looked up into the happy faces.

"Yes," she answered; "but I shall say as well: 'Please God forgive the Signora for trying to spoil the fairy tale!'"

A HEROINE IN BIB AND TUCKER.

CHAPTER I.

“T'S somethink cruel to my mind,” said Sarah the housemaid, “the way Missus uses that poor child—never noticing of her except to find fault, and treating her more like an idjit than a sane little body of nine! But there! you can't put the blessed love of motherhood into a heart of stone.”

She shook her head from side to side, till nurse, who was warming her hands over the fire, began to think she would shake it off.

“Your cap puts me all of a fidget, Mary,” she declared, when it waggles.”

Mary glanced round the nursery, remarking on the lack of toys.

“There ain't much for 'er to play with, either,” she continued, nodding towards the dimly-lighted room in which the child was sleeping. “The fact is, I've heard say that Mrs. Stebbing was just mad at not having a boy—she would hardly look at the girl.”

190 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

"You'd think in nine years she ought to be gettin' over the disappointment. Anyway, we shall see."

"I don't know what will become of that poor child when you goes," continued Sarah dolefully. "I'll try and keep a heye on her ; but what with a new nurse and a new——Did any one call?"

"No!"—rising, and listening at the door of the night nursery—"she is fast asleep."

"Dear little lamb, it is 'ard for a child not to be loved, very 'ard."

"There is more in 'er than what anyone think for. You mark my words, she'll make 'er way in the world as sure as my name is Eliza Pocket. Yet really, nurse, without joking, I do believe them 'eartless parents think as she's a bit balmy on the crumpet."

As they talked, the child in the next room lay with her head over the edge of the bolster, her ear straining to catch their murmured conversation, and on the alert to feign sleep.

At last she sat upright, clasping her small hands over her knees, with a strangely old expression on her features. She stared at the shadows blankly, and shivered—a frail specimen of childhood, torn by the miseries of life at the early age of nine.

"What did it mean—all they were saying in the next room?" Her red hair, curly and thick, clustered round her face ; she pressed her sharp little chin upon her knuckles, doubling herself up in a sitting posture.

Nurse was going—nurse, the only person who had ever

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 191

been kind to little Beatrice and then she would be left to the tender mercies of a stranger—and her mother!

The thought appalled her, for she was terribly sensitive over slights, though in her life they were many.

"Yes," Sarah's voice continued, "this ain't what I call a happy home, not for servants nor child, though I'm not one to murmur. Oh!"—springing to her feet—"I thought it was a ghost!"

A white clad figure stood between them, a cold little hand was on the arm of Sarah's chair.

"It's true," cried the child, in a voice that no longer sounded young in tone, so strangled was it with sharp pain.

"Oh! Miss Bee, you naughty girl," said nurse lovingly, gathering the small form in her arms, and holding the pink toes to the fire. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Beatrice buried her face on the woman's shoulder, and sobbed aloud.

"You're go-o-ing away!"

"No, no," murmured nurse uneasily.

"No, no!" echoed Sarah, taking up the cue, "nurse won't ever leave you, ducky."

"It is wicked to tell stories," Beatrice declared, "you *said* it,—and—and——"

She could not finish her sentence for choking over the words. "There, there; I'll come back anyway soon," kissing away the child's tears.

She carried her back to bed, tucked her up, and waited beside her till she fell asleep.

192 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

When Beatrice woke again it was dark, the house still ; she lay for a while staring at a chink of light by the window.

Suddenly the sound of running feet on the passage below startled the sleeping household, a pealing of bells, and her father's voice speaking to the servants.

Beatrice sprang from her bed, and running to the banisters peeped over.

The lady in the grey dress, with the white collar and cuffs, that had lately come to the house, looked out of her mother's room and whispered something.

"Mother is ill," thought Beatrice, creeping back through the dark. "I hope she will die!"

* * * * *

The following morning when nurse came to call Bee, she told her she had a little brother.

* * * * *

Beatrice gazed wonderingly on the queer pink thing that would some day be a man, lying in its white berceaunette, doubling two tiny fists ferociously, and making grotesque grimaces.

"Isn't he lovely?" she said to the new nurse.

The woman took no notice of the remark, she was stitching prosaically.

"I don't like you nearly so much as Eliza," continued the child in the same grave tones. "Her name was Miss Pocket, you know, and she was not half as ugly as you."

"You're a very rude little girl!" cried the new nurse,

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 193

"and you shan't speak another word the whole afternoon, to teach you manners. Now mind, if I hear a sound I will tell your mamma."

Thus relegated to silence, little Beatrice crept to the window, and flattened her face against the pane. It was raining outside, a steady, uninteresting downpour. How cold and bleak the sky looked, grey, leaden, cloud garbed.

A feeble bluebottle, which had survived the cold, crept like a remnant of dead summer on the glass.

"It must be very hungry," thought Beatrice, "to be so weak." She saw a small piece of bread lying on a side table.

Noiselessly securing a round soft ball of dough, she placed it by the bluebottle. Yes, surely the fly was eating it, clinging in starving anguish to the proffered food.

Then, as though too weak for the exertion, the dying fly fell to the ground, struggling on its back at Bee's feet.

"Poor thing" she whispered softly, bending down. "Do you want to be killed?"

The fly struggled on to its feet and crawled nearer the little outstretched hand.

Then Beatrice saw that one of its wings was broken.

"You can't want to live," murmured the child, "in this nasty, cold, miserable world. You have nothing to eat, and no one to care for you. You are in pain. Shall I end your suffering?" It had reached the tip of her nail, and so intently was she watching its movements, she did

194 **A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.**

not perceive the new nurse turn and eye her severely. "I don't like doing it—I don't like killing you; but it would be so kind!"

For a moment there was a struggle in the child's breast, while something very like a tear glistened in the corner of her eye. Then the resolution was made. She seized the bluebottle between her finger and thumb, and crushed it to death!

"Oh! you nasty little demon," cried the nurse, starting up and shaking her crossly. "Have you nothing better to do than kill flies? You are a naughty, cruel girl—and you have dirtied your fingers. Go and wash them at once. You shan't talk after tea now—not till six o'clock."

But Beatrice smiled, in her odd, unchildish, enigmatical way. What did the punishment matter? She had saved the fly!

CHAPTER II.

"If you're not a good girl, I'll tell some big goblins to come, and they will cut you up in pieces and carry you away in a basket," said the strident voice of the new nurse.

"No, they won't," replied Beatrice, with a wise little shake of her head.

"Why not, indeed, Miss Impudence?"

"I wouldn't go. I'd kill them, I'd kick them, I'd pick out their eyes with brooches!"

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 195

Bee stamped her foot as she spoke, and breathed hard. She looked a perfect little fury standing in the firelight.

"Stay and mind baby, then, while I go downstairs with his bottle, and if you move away from him I will give you what for when I come up. There! stand at the foot of his cradle—so, and don't take your eyes off him."

Beatrice never seemed to tire of watching by her brother, and the nurse knew well it was safe to leave them alone under those conditions.

Baby opened his eyes wide and stared at Bee. She made a little cooing sound in her throat that brought a smile. She loved the tiny human body, resting under the blue curtains, and would hold his fingers for hours, laughing to feel their pressure.

"Everybody loves you, baby," she said, "*even* mamma!" her eyes expanding at this wonderful intelligence. "P'raps that's just 'cause you're little ; p'raps she didn't mind me when I was only so big. When you are as old as I am, everybody scolds you, unless there is a Sarah in the house—and some little boys haven't any Sarah—and then it's *awful*. I've only just thought of that, baby, about its being so bad for you when you grows."

A look of intense pity steals over Bee's face.

"They'll punish you a lot, and make you do lessons with the governess. There are those sums, too, that never come right ; you won't get any jam for tea on 'sum' days. She will make you play scales on cold mornings when your chilblains ache—well, like teeth, when the

196 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

chemist pulls them out. Then when you're bigger still, they will send you to school—I am going to school soon. Schools are places where old women live, and bother all the children just like if you were at home, only sometimes it's worse. There are never any Sarahs there to kiss you good-bye; they don't have them, 'cause they are kind to the children, and then it isn't a school."

Baby puckered up his face and looked as if he were going to cry.

"Yes, it is bad for those big children, isn't it, baby? Nurse says you grow so fast, just twice the pace of most babies, so you will be old quicker. Then mother won't love you any more, and you'll be just as miserable as I am!"

Beatrice stopped speaking as the rustle of a silk gown sounded in the passage.

She recognised the tread instinctively; it always made her heart beat a little faster with fear.

She drew nearer to baby, as if to protect him from something, she knew not what.

A moment later and Mrs. Stebbing, tall and gaunt, swept towards the cot.

A look of pride softened her hard face as she bent over her infant son, without glancing at the girl. For some cause unknown, the baby broke into a prolonged wail, as his mother stooped to kiss him.

Bee thought that perhaps the prim peck which Mrs. Stebbing occasionally bestowed upon her, had chilled and frightened the drowsy child.

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 197

But the touch of Bee's soft warm fingers soothed his cry, and baby was silent again, as if induced to slumber by the caressing pats of that small hand.

"What are you doing?" asked Mrs. Stebbing.

"Minding baby while nurse is downstairs," replied Beatrice meekly.

As she looked from the tiny features on the pillow to her mother's bullet eyes, she realised for the first time what it would mean parting from baby, and going to school. "He will have no one to watch over him then, when nurse is out of the room. Perhaps he will die, or be very ill, and need her help, her protection!" she thought. She advanced timidly towards her mother, the tears standing in her eyes, and a sob choking her speech.

"If you please," she began, "I don't want to go to school."

"*Indeed!*" exclaimed Mrs. Stebbing, placing a pince-nez on her high-bridged nose, and looking down on Beatrice disapprovingly. "And is it for you to say what you like or dislike?"

"It is baby, you see," faltered the child. "I *can't* leave him, he wants me. Oh! don't send me away!"

The tears now coursed down her cheeks, but she brushed them aside with her knuckles.

"You are a very untruthful child," said Mrs. Stebbing, "trying to make believe that baby is your reason for shirking the studies at school."

"But he is, he is!" declared Beatrice, passionately, clutching with sudden boldness at her mother's dress, as

198 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

she moved towards the door. "I love baby, and baby loves me. We want to be together, 'cause there's lots of things might happen if I left him. What's the good of me if I go away and don't look after him?"

Mrs. Stebbing was amazed at the child's persistency. She was not accustomed to be argued with.

She pulled her dress aside from Bee's detaining clasp, speechless with astonishment. Then she answered acidly:

"It is very rude of little girls to dispute with their elders. All arrangements have been made for you to go to Miss Seager's Boarding School at Streatham, and it is to be hoped you will learn manners there, and behave better than you do at home."

To her surprise, Beatrice did not take these words as final, but flinging herself on her knees, continued to plead for a brief respite.

"Let me wait just a wee bit longer," she cried, clasping her hands; "only a little while, till baby grows big enough to come too. He'll be all right with me. I'll fight for him ever so if the other children tease, and keep him warm, and good, and comfy."

Mrs. Stebbing laughed in the cold, freezing manner that was worse to Beatrice's sensibilities than a blow. It seemed to stun her.

"Don't make yourself so utterly ridiculous, Beatrice. Get up off the floor at once; you are tumbling your clean frock, and behaving very naughtily. If I hear any more of this nonsense from you I shall send you straight to bed."

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 199

The child rose slowly, stood in the centre of the room, and stared at her mother silently in a manner that made Mrs. Stebbing feel at a disadvantage. Those green eyes of Beatrice's were strangely penetrating for one so young.

"Now mind what I say—not another word," continued the gaunt woman, almost wishing that Bee would speak in spite of the command.

She walked haughtily from the room, still followed by the mute appeal of her child's glance.

As the door closed, Beatrice beat her clenched fists on her small forehead, and rushed up and down the nursery like a creature possessed.

"What *will* become of him, what will happen to poor baby?" she cried. "Oh, I can't go, I can't, I can't!"

For the thought of the men that were to come for her and Sarah, and which she had feigned to disbelieve, crept back into her heart with lurking terror.

What if nurse should be right, and while she was safely in the school at Streatham, baby was cut up in pieces, and sacrificed to those horrible goblins?

When the new nurse returned, and Beatrice saw her quietly seated on guard by the sleeping child, she slipped noiselessly away, and went in search of Sarah.

She met her on the back staircase.

"Sarah, do you love me?"

"To be sure, Miss Beatrice; who could 'elp it, with them pretty little ways?"

"Do you love baby too?"

"Yes, bless 'is 'eart!"

200 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

"Then I want you to help me and him. He would like you to ask mother to keep me at home. I've asked and it is no good, but if *you* were to, p'raps she might change her mind. Oh, Sarah, do, for baby's sake!"

Sarah looked amused at the strange request.

"Me!" she gasped, open mouthed. "Oh Lor!"

Then she burst into a spasm of hilarious mirth, while Beatrice felt her last hope shiver and die.

She turned away to hide her disappointment, pressing her hand to her heart under her brown holland pinafore.

"I think," she whispered to herself, "it's broke."

CHAPTER III.

MRS. STEBBING had not been feeling in the best of health, and was reclining on the sofa in her boudoir when her cousin Edith Bartlett, accompanied by a gentleman friend, drove over to call.

"I did so want to see the dear baby," explained Edith, "and I was sure you wouldn't mind my bringing Mr. Compton, too. May I take him up to the nursery, Clara? It would be such fun. We'll go and astonish 'the treasure.' Don't you come, dear; you must be so tired of showing it off—I beg its pardon, I mean '*him*.'"

"I never weary of worshipping the sweet mite," murmured Mrs. Stebbing, "but perhaps I had better stay here. Nurse objects to a crowd in the nursery; it upsets her equanimity."

"Come along, Mr. Compton," said Edith gaily, and the young man followed her upstairs.

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 201

Bee ran out to greet them, and nurse, who was in one of her surliest moods, retired to the night nursery.

"Come and see my beauty," cried Beatrice, dragging Edith by the hand. "Isn't he fat and pink?"

"Yes, just like those little round worms you use for bait," said Mr. Compton.

"Don't be silly," answered Edith, laughing.

She bent down over Baby.

"Don't you love him, Bee?"

"Ever so much," replied the child.

"I always think it is a dreadful thing to look at an infant," drawled Mr. Compton.

"Why?"

"It makes me soliloquise! Now only think, Miss Bartlett, of all the horrors in store for that poor little beggar. To begin with, he has got to die—he was only born for that—he has got to suffer, we *know*. Can any man escape? Some pretty woman will probably break his heart at one-and-twenty, then he will go to the dogs for a bit, and enjoy himself. When he has enjoyed himself he will have run through his money. Then he will begin to work. Imagine the struggles, the disappointments, the heart burnings, the strife. Think of the sleepless nights and long, weary unsuccessful days. Hardly a soul living would willingly go back one year of his life to traverse it again, yet that helpless creature with a bottle, for no fault of his own, must drag through perhaps eighty or ninety of them. He will have an enemy—many enemies—and the woman he loves will be

202 **A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.**

the worst among them. A lion may tear him in South Africa, he may be buried at sea after a parching fever, or worse still, slowly decay in a little village, a victim to old age."

"Don't draw such dreadful pictures, Mr. Compton, it is very gruesome of you," Edith protested.

"We passed a child's funeral to-day, and I looked with envy on the little shell," he murmured. "But forgive me, Miss Bartlett, it is only one of the usual ruminations in which I indulge when in the presence of infantile beauty."

Beatrice listened. The words, uttered, oh so carelessly, burnt like fire in her soul. The two visitors had forgotten the presence of the little girl standing quiet as a mouse behind them.

At last they turned, and Edith kissed Bee's auburn curls, murmuring a word of envy for their rich colour.

"Artists will go mad over that child when she is a woman," said Mr. Compton. "The hair and the eyes are superb."

"I wonder if she will have a happy life?"

"No! That sort of mouth is born miserable. Its very smile is a tragedy. No one could be really peaceful with those lips and chin."

"Stay one moment," said Edith. "I have heard you say you are a phrenologist. Can you tell the meaning of this extra large bump at the back of Baby's head?"

"That," he replied, looking very wise, "undoubtedly means he is born to be hanged."

"Baby! Baby!" cried Beatrice, as their light chatter

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 203

sounded down the stairs, "did you hear them, Baby, what they said."

She held her brother's tiny fingers in her trembling hands.

Her face might have been carved in stone, so strangely white was it.

Her eyes dilated as they rested on the peaceful features of the unconscious infant. How little he knew of the thorny paths, the rough ways. Why had he been born to suffer. Why *should* he suffer if she could prevent it?

The thought paralysed her small bewildered brain, while a hundred half-formed schemes rushed through it.

Her ideas were like the flakes in a snow storm, when you look upwards, a whirling mass of mystery.

"I can't! I can't!" she moaned. "You must bear it, Baby; the bad times what's coming, even the ha—ha—hanging. It will be awful hard to die then, when you are a great big man. Thomas always drowns our kittens when they're small, 'cause they don't suffer—they don't mind—they don't know! But the old cats can't die for ever so long, and then it is cruel."

Nurse came rustling into the room, carrying an armful of clean white pinafores.

The infant moved in its cot and wailed.

"Why is baby crying?" asked Bee.

"He is cutting his first tooth, I reckon," replied nurse. "It is a bad time for babies; they fret and scream, and keep you awake most like all night. It goes hard with them when they are teething."

The simple words decided Beatrice—her own feelings

204 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

should be laid low, sacrificed, trampled under—Baby should be her first care.

"I'll do it," she whispered, through the lace of his curtains, "before to-morrow, darling, and the bright angels——"

"Come and hold this box open," cried nurse in the next room.

But as Beatrice slowly obeyed her, she shook her head wisely, and a look of infinite love passed over her face, as she repeated slowly to herself:

"The bright angels!"

* * * * *

It was night, and Beatrice lay awake, still busily planning Baby's safety.

How should she do it?—how rescue him from the pain and sorrow, and give him up to the fair home she had heard was called "Heaven?" The kittens had been drowned in the tank in the yard. Thomas said they felt nothing, and it was better than letting them live to be starved.

Perhaps if she said a prayer it would come quite easily. Bee folded her hands, and whispered her evening hymn.

"I'll go now," she said.

But how could she get out of the house? All the shutters were bolted, and to-morrow she would be sent to school. If only it were possible to get into the garden, Baby should rest in the peaceful river which flowed at the end of the shrubbery. It was very deep. He would sink directly if she dropped him from the wall,

A Heroine in Bib and Tucker. 205

The slight figure, gowned in white, crept like a silent moonbeam through the passage.

Her bare feet made no sound on the thick stair-carpet as she slowly descended to the hall.

"What was that light in the dining-room?"

Beatrice stole behind a curtain and watched.

Three men with black masks over their faces came out and passed through the hall, one carrying a bag.

She watched them out of sight, marvelling at their silent tread, then peeped into the dining-room curiously.

Dinner knives were lying in confusion, used to wrench open locks, and a perfect show of rejected electro-plate.

But what was far more wonderful and fortunate, too, the shutter was torn open, and the cold night air rushed in upon Bee's quivering form. "How good the angels were to Baby; they had arranged it purposely so!"

Swiftly she fled upstairs, and passed breathlessly into the nursery.

"Don't cry, little brother," she whispered tenderly, "or we shall be lost."

The baby seemed to understand, or was it that her gentle arms never roused him from his midnight slumbers? She knew not, for it was dark, and she was afraid to touch his eyes.

"It is all right," she whispered, "they have opened the windows for us, and they're dressed like men. I never thought angels were like *that*."

Staggering under her burden, yet fired by enthusiasm, she bore him below unheard, and clasping her

206 A Heroine in Bib and Tucker.

treasure tighter to her heart, her lips pressed to his warm flesh, faced the bitter blast without.

"*Now, Baby,*" she cried, running with her bare feet on the hard gravel, "*now we can do it, darling. Now you shall go to God!*"

How dark it was in the shrubbery, she stumbled every moment, and her resolve wavered as she reached the dark stream.

"It is hard to part, sweetest," she whispered, "but we must do that either way. They won't let me stay by you, Baby, or it might have been different."

Here a fresh idea—one of infinite delight and glorious possibilities—broke in upon the child's intelligence.

"Why not go together?" she cried, quivering with sudden relief and joy. "I will carry you into heaven, Baby, in my own arms."

She gazed into the swollen river, a smile parting her lips, and she kissed her brother for the last time.

Then she sprang forward into the rushing tide, and girl and boy were swept together down the icy stream.

No cry, no sound, only the gurgling water, and the gates of paradise.

THE FAIRY WITH THE GREY BEARD.

I.

“HEN Mr. Lionel comes in send him at once to my study.”

The words were spoken peremptorily by an elderly gentleman with a sharp deeply-lined face, and narrow slit eyes. Morgan, the butler, knew from his master's tone that Mr. Lionel Trollope had in some way violated the paternal authority. With a sedate “Yes, sir,” Morgan retreated, feeling a sense of benign pity for the breezy, blue-eyed youth—the only son of a bookworm and recluse.

“Wonder what Mr. Lionel has been up to now,” Morgan remarked to his fellow-servants. “The master looks black as thunder this afternoon. I don't see he can expect a young gentleman to be always at home—when the place is as dull as ditch-water. But, there! master might as well be at the North Pole for all the company he sees. Folks don't want to call to be growled and grumbled at. The fact is there are only two

208 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

thoughts in his head—books and roses. If he's indoors, then it's them fusty, musty volumes; if he's out in the garden—all he thinks of is killing grubs and snorting over gloire de Dijons!"

With this scathing assertion Morgan waived the subject, and collapsed into reverie.

Meanwhile the bookworm gazed unseeingly upon the open page before him. His brain was busy with wrath, he forgot the soft memories of youth, the clinging hand long mouldered into dust of a sweet-voiced wife who used to say: "Don't be hard on little Lionel."

And now "little Lionel" was a full-grown man—popular with everyone, through the effervescence of his sunny nature.

A glance round Mr. Trollope's study, the largest and most luxurious room in the house, showed him to be a man of taste and a collector. Besides his books, the Gobelin tapestry, the statue in bronze of St. Simon, and the model of the ship in which William, Prince of Orange came to England, claimed attention. For these things were more to him than people of flesh and blood, inhabiting the outside world of Wolverditton, from which he withheld the patronage of his attention. Not entirely self-absorbed, he would on occasions assist the deserving poor, if the vicar of the parish brought the case under his notice, in a diplomatic and convincing manner.

Now he was thinking of his son, the lad from whom he expected great things, and even as he pondered the door opened unceremoniously. A tall young man with curly

The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 209

fair hair, and moustache of a deeper shade, stood before him.

"Oh! so you've come at last?" muttered the book-worm, closing the heavy volume on his desk, and tapping its covers with nervous, irritable fingers.

"Yes, I did not know you wanted me till Morgan gave me your message," replied Lionel, "or I should have been in sooner."

Mr. Trollope made a sound like a little growl.

"Hum!" he said, "you think because I don't go out and about in the world, that I sit at home hearing and seeing nothing. Allow me to tell you, sir, that in this you are mistaken. I do see—and I do hear—I am neither deaf nor blind—and rumour carries fast, evil rumour especially. Now explain, if you can, why you violate my expressed wishes, and make for yourself associates of low-born actresses—women of the stage?"

"Really, I don't understand you," exclaimed Lionel, nevertheless flushing slightly.

"Well, put it in the singular," continued Mr. Trollope, relentlessly. "Can you deny that yesterday afternoon you were seen escorting a certain Miss Archville from the theatre at which she is playing, after the Wednesday *matinée*?"

"No—I do not deny it."

"There, you see I was right, and I repeat again—a low-born actress, a penniless——"

Lionel rose to his feet, an angry gleam in the blue eyes usually so smiling and tranquil.

210 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

"She is not low-born—nor penniless, for the matter of that," he burst out, hotly, "and I must beg you will not use these insulting terms to a lady who is a friend of mine."

"Oh! I know the sort of friend!" sneered Mr. Trollope, with bitter emphasis. "I'm not such a hermit but I remember the way of the world. When young men make friends with such women—they generally end——"

"Father," broke in Lionel, "take care what you are saying! Don't you see you are talking in the dark? When you hear all the circumstances you will be sorry for your hasty judgment. Miss Archville is——"

"I don't want to know anything about her, I refuse to listen," thundered Mr. Trollope, glaring at the offender through his spectacles. "But mark my words, sir, I'll stand no nonsense. If this liaison continue, if I don't assure myself of its ceasing instantly, I will cut you off with a shilling—you shall be no son of mine!"

Mr. Trollope struck the desk with his fist violently.

When his temper was thoroughly roused argument became useless. Lionel, forbidden to speak in his own defence, ended the interview by withdrawing his presence and undiplomatically slamming the door after him.

II.

A SMALL girl, with large brown eyes, set in a plump, rosy face, danced along the asphalt walks of Wolver-

The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 211

ditton. It was not from sheer lightness of heart, but merely to avoid the dulness of Maria's slow, even steps. Maria, the nursemaid, called her back, and clutched her by the hand.

"Come and walk like a little lady," she said; "I can't have you rushing about all over the place!"

"Don't want to be a little lady," pouted Miss Joan Egerton.

Maria looked shocked.

"You see," Joan continued, wisely, "little ladies, as you call them, have always to be so stupidly good. They must not go out alone, or climb trees, or—or—break things," she added, vaguely. "If you make me walk, instead of run, you must just tell me stories—fairy stories for choice."

The child glanced up plaintively at Maria's unimaginative face. To an older mind the woman's stolid expression would have dispelled all hope of a possible romance. But young hearts never despair, and Joan's anticipation rose as she made her request. Maria's mind was a blank; her stolid brain could weave no fairy fantasy to satisfy the craving of a child's desire. In order to turn the train of Joan's thoughts she paused by an iron gate, and pointed through the bars. "Look at the pretty flowers," she said.

Joan peered into the garden, with her nose against the gate rails. A long line of rose trees in full bloom arrested her attention.

"White, pink, red, yellow" she counted the colours on

212 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

her fingers. "Perhaps there is a fairy in that garden—a rose-fairy, like the one in the pantomime last winter."

Maria considered a minute. She knew the house and its master well. Then she nodded her head and answered mysteriously: "Yes, you are right, Miss Joan: a fairy lives in there, just as kind a fairy as ever you could hope to meet, and, if you are a good girl, I'll tell you all about it."

With this alluring prospect in view Joan consented to walk demurely by Maria's side.

"It was the winter when mother fell ill, before I went out to service, she explained. "Father was not strong enough to work, and we hadn't any money. Suddenly one day, when things was just at their worst, help came. It appears the vicar found a good fairy in that very house, with plenty of money to spare, and the fairy sent the money to us just as Christmas time, with a bunch of roses for mother. In fairy gardens the roses never die."

This strange intelligence made a deeper impression on Joan than Maria could have guessed. A bewildering thrill passed through the silk-frocked frame, while the brown eyes grew big with wonder—and sudden hope.

"You—you were very unhappy," the child gasped, "and the fairy put everything right?"

Joan's fingers tightened with excitement over Maria's hand. The latter nodded in reply to the eager question.

"Everything," she said. "Mother got well, and father went away for a sea trip—he was able to work when he came home."



“‘Perhaps there is a fairy in that garden.’”



The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 215

"What was the fairy like?" asked Joan, eagerly, her mind full of magic wands, spangles, and white wings.

"He was a funny-looking fairy," laughed Maria; "a fairy with a grey beard."

Joan paled from disappointment.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and her jaw dropped.

"But they are the best kind of fairies; they can do the most for you," Maria declared.

Her tone was singularly convincing.

For a long while Joan walked in silence, busy with her own thoughts. When Maria turned to go back, a breathless wonder seized the child, as step by step they drew nearer to the rose garden.

"You will let me look just once again," she pleaded, when the iron gates came in sight. She had grown accustomed to the thought of a fairy with a grey beard, the first paralyzing effect having worn off after reflection. Maria smiled at the keen interest displayed, lingering a moment, while Joan feasted her eyes upon the magic garden where this strange freak of a fairy lived.

The moment Joan got home she crept softly to her sister's room and pushed the door open.

"It's only me, Patricia."

A tall girl, gowned in white, stood before a mirror, brushing a cloud of golden hair, which positively gleamed in the morning sunshine.

"Oh! are you getting up?" from the small questioner.

"Is your headache better?"

"Yes, dear."

216 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

"And you're not crying now?"

"No," with a faint smile.

"I'm so glad," cooed Joan, as she nestled against the soft folds of Patricia's gown, "because it is going to come all right, and you need not be unhappy any more."

Patricia's eyes flashed with sudden light, as she turned them eagerly upon Joan's flushed face. The brush fell from her hand.

"What do you mean? How do you know? You can't have heard."

"I—I mean," stammered Joan, "I am going to ask a good fairy; it's a wonderful secret of mine!"

Patricia stifled a sigh of disappointment—a sigh that was almost a groan.

"Oh, I see," she said. The glimmer of tears hung trembling under her long lashes.

III.

SINCE the previous day when Lionel left his father's study, with set lips and a dangerous glint in his blue eyes, the two men had not spoken. Mr. Trollope nursed his resentment in sulky silence—a settled cloud on his wrinkled brow.

"If he dare!" the old man muttered to himself, as he sat alone in his sanctum; "if he dare flout me!"

The window leading to the garden stood open, to admit a cool breeze, and the roses peeped in, their faces



"A tall girl stood before a mirror."



The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 219

warm from contact with the sun. Involuntarily Mr. Trollope turned his eyes towards the garden, as if compelled. Was it that his ear caught the sound of a light footfall on the gravel, or had he seen a tiny shadow mingling with the sunshine, as it played upon the curtains? Anyhow, he kept his gaze riveted upon the open window, as if expecting something.

A lovely child, dressed in the pink of the rose petals, strayed to the threshold, with hesitating steps. Hatless she stood, her hair loosely framing her eager face, from which a pair of bright eyes, twinkling like stars, looked straight across at Mr. Trollope, sitting in his big arm-chair.

He was too astonished to speak, as the bold intruder advanced, walking bravely enough now towards the amazed old man. She came right up to him, laying one hand on the arm of the chair, and just feeling him with the tips of her disengaged fingers, as if to make sure he was real. Having satisfied herself on this point, she smiled up at him confidentially. He smiled back, somewhat grimly, it is true, but still he smiled.

"Are you a fairy?" she asked, in one of those big, childish whispers which travel round a room resonantly.

Mr. Trollope gave a start of surprise; he drew his eyebrows together, and coughed nervously.

"A fairy, my little girl! Whatever makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't think—I know," she answered triumphantly; "because Maria, my nurse, told me. I

220 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

know it is you—Maria said the fairy had a grey beard!” Joan stammered out the words, so great was her excitement.

Mr. Trollope listened to the intelligence with profound interest.

“You can do everything,” the child continued, leaning up against him coaxingly; “that is why I came here to-day. Why, even your roses grow in the winter, because it’s a magic garden!”

“Do they really?” exclaimed the old man, becoming engrossed in the conversation.

“Yes—you know they do,” laughing, “and Maria said you were just as good a fairy as anyone could hope to meet, though you had got a grey beard!”

“Most obliging of Maria to give me such an estimable character, I’m sure,” murmured Mr. Trollope, gratified as well as amused at the child’s confidence.

“Oh! Maria knows,” his uninvited guest informed him; “so I thought I would just get you to make it all right for Patricia. She is my sister, and I simply can’t bear to see her cry. She’s ever so unhappy about something, that was why I came here to-day. I had to slip away when nobody was looking, and I could not wait to get my hat. It is the first time I have been out alone, and I ran all the way. I asked a lady to open your gate for me, it was so heavy, and the handle seemed rather high up. I was looking for you a long time in the garden, for I thought fairies always lived out of doors.”

The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 221

"No ; I come in sometimes just for a change."

"And do you like the house?" she inquired, politely.

"Well, I don't exactly mind it," Mr. Trollope owned, with a glance round his spacious study. He felt for the moment as if the unexpected advent of this pretty, confiding child had cast a spell over the sombre room, making it verily and indeed a charmed palace.

He found himself half unconsciously stroking her tumbled hair, and the silky texture of those sunny locks stirred some hidden chord of emotion in his breast.

"Little girl," he said, "you are very sure of your fancies, but even fairies may fail us sometimes, however deeply we trust in them. When you grow older you will find the fairies drifting farther away, and the hard things of the world creeping in! I don't want to shatter your illusions—Heaven knows, they are precious enough, though they perish so soon—but you must not be too disappointed if you find out I am not a fairy after all."

He spoke with intense earnestness, and a mist gathered before his eyes, blotting out the grave face upturned to his, for Joan's smiles were fading now.

"Oh!" she cried, "I knew it all along—I knew you were only a gnome!"

This was a fresh surprise for Mr. Trollope ; he blinked his eyelids, while his mind groped back to the folk-lore of his forgotten childhood.

"Let me see, what is a gnome?" he asked, acknowledging his ignorance, frankly.

222 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

"Oh! you know," Joan persisted, speaking incredulously, "a little thing that runs about in a wood. But I think you look too nice for a gnome," she added, on second thoughts; "and, then, Maria always speaks the truth, because she says if people don't, they'll never get to Heaven. You see, Maria has several relations there already, so she has to be particular."

Mr. Trollope did not understand children in the least, yet he keenly appreciated Joan. The wonder with which her eyes were riveted upon him made the old man feel a stranger to himself; her quaint speech pleased his imagination.

"Are you quite alone here?" she asked. "Haven't you any subjects under you. Perhaps there is a fairy queen—I should like to see her!"

"There was a queen once," he answered, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. "But she has gone away. Would you like to see her portrait?"

He fumbled with something at his watch-chain—a gold locket, which opened as he pressed a spring. Joan clambered on his knee in order to inspect the picture. A sweet face peeped out of the locket, seeming to smile at the child.

"Isn't she lovely!" Joan exclaimed. "I wish she had not gone; it is a pity! Where is she now?"

"In Heaven," murmured the old man, staring down at the picture, a far-away expression in his eyes.

"Oh! with Maria's friends!"

As she spoke the door opened, and Morgan, with his solemn face and stately bearing, entered the room. He

The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 223

was carrying a card on a silver salver, which he nearly dropped at the sight of his master earnestly conversing with a hatless mite in a pink smock.

Mr. Trollope started too at being thus discovered, and half pushed the child from him. She was so sure of his good-nature that the action failed to shatter her confidence, but, attracted at that moment by the model ship, she strayed away, leaving Mr. Trollope under Morgan's stern eye.

"A lady has called, sir."

Mr. Trollope peered at the card through his glasses.

"Miss Egerton," he said. "Who the dickens is Miss Egerton?"

"Lives in the big house at the corner, sir," replied Morgan, in an undertone; "the Hon. Miss Egerton. She is thought a deal of in the neighbourhood. I think she has come after the little girl." As he spoke he indicated Joan, flitting about amongst Mr. Trollope's treasures.

"Show her in, Morgan."

The words came sharply from the old man's lips; he drew his brows together to a puzzled frown, and thought deeply.

Miss Egerton, the Hon. Miss Egerton—the class of woman with whom Lionel might have been expected to fall in love! Instead, he was wasting himself on an actress—some brazen favourite of the boards, born most likely in the gutter, risen from the last realm of—nowhere!

An excited childish voice dispelled his reverie.

224 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

"You really must settle about Patricia," it was saying in his ear, "because that is why I came. Oh!" as the door opened again, "why, here she is! Have you a magic wand after all? Did you make her come?"

Mr. Trollope rose to bow courteously. A tall, golden-haired girl stood before him. Her eyes were large and hazel, with those strange dark spots in them which make for beauty. A trifle pale, her face lit up with a wonderful smile at the sight of little Joan perched on the arm of Mr. Trollope's chair.

"We were so frightened," she said. "Joan disappeared. A friend told us she had been seen in this garden. I could hardly believe it, but I came to find out. I don't know how to apologize sufficiently for her intrusion."

The girl had a low, sweet voice, which reminded Mr. Trollope of the voice which used to say: "Don't be hard on little Lionel."

And this was the sister whose sorrow he had been asked to cure, who was "ever so unhappy about something."

"Pray—pray—don't apologize," he begged. "I am only too pleased to think little Miss Joan strayed in such a safe direction. I rather fancy my roses attracted her. I have a fine show of blossoms which can be seen from the road."

He was terribly afraid lest Miss Egerton should discover the fallacy of the fairy, for in feminine society Mr. Trollope was intensely shy. He flew to his roses for

The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 225

protection, though Joan was quite ready to contradict him.

"I came because Maria said——" broke in the little voice, but Mr. Trollope interrupted hastily :—

"Perhaps you would like to see some specimen trees ; roses are a hobby of mine. I am quite learned on the subject!"

He hustled Joan into the garden, as Miss Egerton gladly consented. Her eyes wore an enigmatical expression as they followed the figure of the old man.

Once amongst his rose trees he appeared entirely at his ease, discoursing upon the various species animatedly, now and again plucking the choicest for his fair companion.

"There's that son of mine," he said, pointing across the lawn to a figure in a riding-suit making its way towards the stables. "He is a wild young beggar, but I should like to introduce him to you, Miss Egerton, if you have no objection. He will be somewhat surprised to find me with visitors, for you may have heard I am quite a recluse."

Miss Egerton smiled.

"Then you are being very good to us," she said, and her eyes travelled across the lawn.

"Lionel!" shouted Mr. Trollope. "Li-o-nel!"

He had not spoken to his son since the previous day, but his anger temporarily thawed under the magnetic influence of Patricia.

Lionel looked round astonished at seeing the strangers. To discover his father busily entertaining a beautiful girl,

226 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

while a small, pink-clad child played at his feet, was a revelation indeed! No wonder the young man came eagerly forward, amazed to see, and relieved at, this sudden change.

Without explaining the reason of Miss Egerton's presence, Mr. Trollope murmured an introduction, noting, with inward satisfaction, that the lady seemed favourably impressed with his scapegrace son. She smiled, and grew unexpectedly red, till her cheeks were the colour of the scarlet roses. Lionel looked equally pleased. Mr. Trollope, observing this, became suddenly engrossed with little Joan, allowing the child to drag him away on an exploring expedition.

"And how do you like my magic garden?" he asked, when they were out of earshot.

"It isn't so very different to other 'gardens,'" Joan confessed, a touch of disappointment in her tone.

"Perhaps," Mr. Trollope replied, "you will now believe I was not a fairy after all—perhaps, my dear, without knowing it, you were the fairy yourself."

"Oh, no," laughed Joan, "I wash, and eat, and go to bed. I couldn't be a fairy!"

The old man sighed.

"Of course," the child continued, "I see Maria was right. Patricia looks quite happy—since you worked the spell."

Joan's simple faith staggered Mr. Trollope! As she made this calm assertion he glanced back, catching sight of Miss Egerton's face, which brought the force of the child's words home to him.

The Fairy with the Grey Beard. 227

"By Jove!" he muttered to himself; "I believe the boy is making love to her already! What a gay young dog he is! Yet only yesterday his head was turned by a designing minx of the —— Theatre. Well, I'll get him out of that, if the luck turns and he settles his affections on something decent!"

IV.

MR. TROLLOPE and his son stood side by side at the garden gate, watching two figures as they vanished down the road. One—tall, graceful, and slim—did not look back; the other turned repeatedly to wave an energetic hand.

"A beautiful girl, Miss Egerton!" muttered Mr. Trollope, senior, with a shake of his grey head. "Everything to recommend her. Youth, position, looks, fortune! Why on earth can't you fall in love with a girl like that?"

"I *have* fallen in love with her!" said Lionel.

A low whistle escaped the old man. He looked at his son critically.

"Not taken long about it, eh? Well, well, I don't know what this generation is coming to! In my day, young men's hearts were not quite so susceptible; but you know my opinion of your other affair—so I can but be glad. Miss Egerton has intelligence as well as beauty: she would be a prize worth the winning!"

They were strolling back to the house, apparently

228 The Fairy with the Grey Beard.

forgetful of the quarrel which had divided them since the previous afternoon.

"Oh, yes," replied Lionel, "if you had not so entirely given up the world and society, you would know that Miss Egerton is remarkably talented—in fact, one of the cleverest women of the day. She has written the most popular comedy now running in London. Her people encourage her to write, and are proud of her success. Her last play was accepted on the condition that, for the first few weeks at least, she would herself embody the character of the heroine. She takes no salary, but plays from the sheer love of art, under the name of Archville. I asked her to be my wife only two nights ago. Though deigning to love me, she made me promise to keep our engagement secret, till she relinquished her part in the play. I pledged her my word, and for that reason could not speak when you took me to task. I wrote detailing our quarrel, and she has been fretting all day at the thought of our estrangement. She now begs me to tell you the whole truth, she nearly told you herself—but Joan was all ears and eyes!"

Lionel paused—the words had literally tumbled out of his mouth. He stood before his father, panting as if for breath. Mr. Trollope appeared dazed; he stared at his son blankly. At last he spoke.

"Say that all over again, Lionel, I can't take it in!"

The younger man laughed merrily, ignoring the request. Then they walked on, and a moment later Mr. Trollope was laughing too.

THERE WERE GIANTS IN THOSE DAYS.

“OW, children, do be quiet!” said Mrs. Dighton, with a feeble effort at protest, as two small figures scrambled on the window-sill, framing their fair heads in a bower of blossoms.

Roses encircled every window in Hume Cottage—roses strong, healthy, sweet as the pink-cheeked twins, Jack and Millicent.

Jack looked round with beaming blue eyes, while anxious maternal fingers clutched his linen coat and Millicent’s white frock.

“We can’t very well be quiet to-day, you see,” he said, half penitently, yet with no intention of reforming, “because Aunt Lettice is coming to stay.”

A visit from Aunt Lettice proved always an event in the lives of the twins. Lettice, Mrs. Dighton’s youngest and only unmarried sister, was well known in London society as “the pretty Miss Leith.” Many were the offers of marriage this fastidious young person declined, enjoying her freedom to the full. With the children she

230 There were Giants in those Days.

was an immense favourite, owing to an indomitable spirit of fun which ruled her happy young life.

"I see the carriage coming," cried Millicent, tossing herself forward. "Look, it's turned the corner, and Aunt Lettice is driving the ponies."

The twins sprang down from their perilous perch, racing each other to the flower-laden entrance, in which warm greetings became the order of the day, much kissing and hugging, to the disadvantage of Lettice's white muslin gown and delicate lace fichu.

"How well you look!" gasped Mrs. Dighton, with a sudden thrill of admiration. She had always considered her sister pretty, but somehow Lettice seemed changed. The former prettiness had developed into beauty; her eyes possessed a new sparkle, her face an enchanting blush; her whole manner spoke mysteriously of inward happiness and contentment. On the other hand, Mrs. Dighton bore signs of worry and depression. Directly they were alone Lettice asked if anything were the matter.

"We had such a shock about this house," said Mrs. Dighton. "You know how dearly I love the little place; the children were born here, and it is associated with the happiest years of my married life. Well, we grew to look upon it as our own, never dreaming that the lease would not be renewed. But, alas! we built our hopes on sand. The landlord, Sir Charles Carrick, has suddenly taken it into his head to make a private steeplechase course on this very ground. The fields all round us are admirably adapted for his purpose. So poor little Hume

There were Giants in those Days. 231

Cottage, with its lovely flower garden and exquisite views, is to be laid low—destroyed—for a whim. Sir Charles cares nothing about this neighbourhood. Colbrand Castle lies empty from year to year; if he spares a week of his valuable time to the old place he considers his duties fully completed. The steeplechase course will be of little use to him. Hume Cottage means a great deal to us."

"What sort of a man is Sir Charles?" asked Lettice.

"My dear, I have never met him, but I think he must be a horrible creature. It is a standing disgrace the way he neglects his property. His tenants are in the direst poverty; it would be far better if he let Colbrand Castle than allowed the estate to run to rack and ruin."

"Perhaps he is thoughtless; perhaps it has never struck him that his duty lies here," said Lettice. "After all, you know, it would be lonely for an unmarried man to live by himself in that gloomy old giant's house."

Lettice glanced towards the grey castle—just visible through the trees. In olden times a most powerful race of giants were supposed to have inhabited the great Colbrand mansion. The doors were built tremendously high for the convenience of the gigantic owners, while horrible tales of cannibalism and crime still clung to the place. Children's bones had been found beneath the cellars, and fierce spikes remained on the walls as evidences of past torture. It seemed fitting that the present owner should be a phenomenally tall man. The children crept up and caught Lettice's words.

232 There were Giants in those Days.

"She is talking about the giant," whispered Jack, putting his fingers to his lips to silence Millicent.

"I can find no excuse for Sir Charles's neglect," declared Mrs. Dighton, emphatically. "If only his younger brother were in his shoes things would be very different. The brother is a steady married man, most charitable, and ambitious for the country's good. I can only hope rumour may prove right, and that he will soon take the place of Sir Charles, who, I hear, is drinking himself to death as fast as he can. All the poor people would welcome the change."

Lettice had grown suddenly pale; her calm eyes flashed and darkened, like a black squall passing over the blue of the summer sea.

"How unfair to say such things without knowing!" she exclaimed, hotly. "Rumour always jumps at unkind conclusions, and is generally wrong. I am sure Sir Charles cannot be a drunkard. I—I have met friends of his. As to his never coming down here, he is expected at the castle this very day. Your coachman told me on my way from the station."

"Probably he is coming for one night just to look at a horse. His visit won't do anybody any good, except, perhaps, the man from whom he buys the horse."

Mrs. Dighton barely remarked the resentful glitter in her sister's eyes. She was thinking of her own grievance, of Hume Cottage lying in ruins, with all its sweet associations for ever dead. She mournfully contemplated the destruction of the honeysuckle porch, the wooden steps with their banisters of clematis, the roof

There were Giants in those Days. 233

tilled with Virginia creeper and purple wistaria, round which the bees loved to gather. All the sweetness laid low, converted into a burial-ground of bricks and mortar, crushing the stately Madonna lilies, the bold hollyhocks, and beaming sunflowers. To Mrs. Dighton the mere idea of such a massacre seemed little less than a crime.

The children overhearing the conversation, wandered away dolefully hand in hand, even their light young hearts saddened at the thought of losing their summer home.

"You heard what mother said?" whispered Millicent, resting her chin against the surface of a venerable sundial.

"Yes; if the giant died what a good thing it would be! But I don't believe giants ever die! they have to be killed."

"I wonder what he is like!" sighed Millicent, kicking the moss off the base of the sundial with her small square-toed shoes.

"Oh! I know all about him," replied Jack, with pride. "He grows nine inches every month, and is stronger than forty men all put together. He has only one eye, right in the middle of his forehead. He has set that eye upon our house, Millicent, and some day soon he is coming to tear it all down. Mother is very unhappy; I wish I could make it all right for her. I asked father to go and kill the giant, but he only laughed. I think it was just a little unkind of him to laugh, when mother minded so much."

Millicent shook her yellow curls in nodding approval.

234 There were Giants in those Days.

"Your name is Jack," she murmured, enigmatically.

"Well, I know that!" replied the boy.

"Jack dug a deep pit, and put grass and gravel over it—the giant fell into the pit! That was Jack the Giant-Killer." Her voice sank. She fancied the giant poppies were listening, and that they might be mysteriously in communication with the wicked owner of Colbrand Castle.

A strange light came over the boy's face, yet the sun had hidden itself behind a tall copper beech. He took his little sister by the hand and made her sit down amongst the daisies.

Side by side under the sundial the two small figures remained in long and earnest conversation; Millicent with her bare legs crossed, her socks sunk to her ankles.

The boy's cheeks were red as the crimson ramblers which showered their brilliance over a dead tree-stump. Every now and again the children would pause, a reign of short, breathless silence taking up the thread of eager, anxious talk.

As the sun sank they rose, looking towards the red sky.

"I think we might go now," said Jack.

Millicent placed her tiny fingers on his arm.

"We sha'n't be seen in the twilight," she whispered, confidently, as they crept under the shadow of the box-hedge to the little garden-gate leading to the fields.

The twins spoke little as they marched steadily in the direction of Colbrand Castle; they felt it was not an occasion for speech.



“The two small figures remained in long and earnest conversation.”



There were Giants in those Days. 237

Jack's face wore a very determined expression, and he hustled Millicent along ruthlessly whenever her short strides showed signs of lagging.

As they neared the giant's domain their hearts beat fiercely; the picturesque surroundings became part of a weird dream, a fairy land invented by imaginative minds, wherein lurked spirits and hideous monsters.

A gasp of long-drawn tension escaped them as, turning into the castle grounds, the handsome stone mansion broke upon their view, silhouetted against the sky-line in a summer sunset.

A noble castle this, built of cut stone, with colonnaded wings on either side, the parapets formed of open stonework, and the colonnades furnished with rustic seats. The wide doorway stood open, looking to the children like the entrance to a tomb—a cave of dead men's bones and terrors innumerable.

Millicent shivered slightly. She clutched Jack's arm.

"You are not frightened!" he said. It was more an assurance than a question.

"Oh, no; not at all, thank you," replied Millicent, with chattering teeth.

"I hope you understand," continued Jack, "that I am only doing this for mother's sake, and all the poor people who are oppressed by the giant. I don't want to kill him at all myself; in fact, it is rather unpleasant. You won't forget that, Millicent?"

"No," she whispered, "I won't forget. It has got to be done."

238 There were Giants in those Days.

"I think we had better walk straight into the castle ; it would be no good trying to storm it from outside—we haven't enough hands."

Millicent agreed as she looked down at her minute fingers, very grubby from their wanderings through the moss of the sundial.

Side by side the juvenile warriors passed between two cannons, relics of the Crimea, through the great doorway to a lofty square hall.

How dead and desolate the place looked with the evening shadows creeping through a stained-glass window, making patterns on the walls covered with a bewildering collection of weapons, from a blunderbuss to an assegai. Above the high door in big bold letters an inscription was carved :—

"There were giants on the earth in those days."

Jack read the intelligence, but made no allusion to it ; he fancied Millicent seemed somewhat nervous.

"I don't think the giant will be very big," he told her, cheerfully, glancing up at the ceiling, which looked a long way off to Millicent.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Oh! because he could not live in this house if he were like the giant who put his feet on two mountains and then stooped to drink from a stream in the valley between."

"No," said Millicent, and the thought brought comfort to her soul.

"Come along, we had better look for him ; it's no good wasting our time," declared Jack.

There were Giants in those Days. 239

Now that they were actually within the walls of this "Castle Perilous" the would-be giant-killer recollected he was not very clear about his plans.

It had sounded easy enough as they wove wild schemes of conquest under the sundial in the peaceful garden. A thousand splendid ideas and brilliant suggestions made this pilgrimage to the giant's domain a delightfully thrilling and noble undertaking. The elements of romance, founded upon childish folk-lore and nursery tales, inflamed their hearts, set pulses beating, quickened zeal. Now the cold mists of reality crept over Jack's ambitious dream, and made Millicent remember she had foregone her tea.

Slowly the little besieging party advanced, walking with noiseless tread across the thick carpet, Jack leading the way to another high door on the opposite side of the inner hall. The door stood ajar—very softly Jack pushed it open, and two pairs of curious blue eyes peered cautiously into the room. A long, low apartment, lighted by three windows with a western aspect, through which could be seen the crimson sky, radiant with the glories of an exquisite sunset, a sea of flaming carmine, streaked by lines of darkest velvet, piercing grey, plume-like masses of cloud.

In the big bow window, lying back between the arms of a great chair, with eyes closed and feet propped up on a handsome buhl table, lay the giant himself! At his side a pile of newspapers indicated that he had been reading. A silver cigar-box stood open; evidently the

240 There were Giants in those Days.

giant was not above a human weakness for the Goddess Nicotina.

Jack grasped Millicent's shoulder convulsively; his heart beat like a steam-engine, but his courage ran high. "See," he whispered, "the giant is asleep; what luck! That's always the time to kill a giant, you know."

Millicent steadied herself against an old Musherbyah screen which once ornamented a Cairo harem, her bare knees shaking and her anxious gaze cast in the direction of the sleeping monster.

She had expected a hideous apparition, and lo! the creature's hair was curly—auburn; his profile showed classically chiselled features. Millicent saw something attractive in his very pose—the abandonment of a tall, loose-limbed figure under the refining influence of sleep.

As she looked the woman's heart in that baby frame softened and quailed. She forgot the ennobling instincts which had driven Jack to the castle on his murderous errand; forgot that Hume Cottage, her mother's happiness, and the well-being of the poor hung in the balance. The giant must be saved from destruction—the giant with the fair moustache and curly head.

"I know what we will do," said Jack. "Give me your sash, and I'll creep up and tie it round his neck. Then we will each take one end, and pull just as hard as ever we can till his head falls off!"

The mere idea filled Millicent with unspeakable horror. Pushing Jack aside, she rushed frantically across the room, flinging herself with a cry of warning upon the man's powerful chest.

There were Giants in those Days. 241

"Wake up!—wake up!—wake up!" she cried three times in her shrill, small voice, shaking the lapel of his coat vigorously. Sir Charles Carrick started so violently that he sent her tumbling on the floor; then he rubbed his eyes, uncertain if he were still dreaming, and stared round.

What he saw certainly perplexed him.

A tiny white figure with a frightened face, in a crumpled heap on the rug; a crestfallen boy, helping the thing in socks to rise, and muttering reproachfully:—

"Oh! Millicent, you have spoilt everything!"

At last, fully convinced he was awake, the Lord of the Manor stopped blinking his eyes and addressed the intruders.

"How do you do?" he said, simply, holding out a big hand to these strange guests. "What on earth are you playing at?"

His calm tone reassured Millicent, who had been dangerously near tears. She advanced timidly, offering her chubby fingers in return for the giant's proffered palm. By way of introduction she whispered in a grave undertone, nodding towards her brother:—

"That's Jack the Giant-Killer!"

Sir Charles controlled a smile.

"Oh! I see; you've come to explore the giant's house?"

"No," she explained, "we didn't care one bit about the house, but we thought you were much bigger, and only wore one eye in the middle of your forehead, so Jack decided to kill you."

242 There were Giants in those Days.

"Really! Now, that's very interesting," replied the giant, good-humouredly, as he lifted Millicent on his knee; "very interesting indeed! But why a poor beggar should be killed because he has only one eye, I can't imagine. Of course, I know I am very ignorant, and I should be much obliged if you would tell me——"

Jack came forward with words of wisdom to save the situation.

"Millicent has muddled it all up," he said. "The eye did not matter, but if I had killed the giant everybody would have been so pleased, especially mother."

"Mother must be a charming person!" said Sir Charles.

"Yes, she's just a dear!" murmured Jack, enthusiastically. "Millicent and I would do anything for her—wouldn't we, Millicent?"

Millicent signified approval by emphatically nodding.

"But why should your mother desire my destruction?"

The giant put the question kindly, a puzzled expression on his brow.

With the sincerity of childhood, Jack hastened to explain.

"You see, it was this way," he said. "Mother was telling my aunt that if you died your brother would come to the castle, which would be so much better for everybody, because he's good and thinks about the poor people. Your tenants are not a bit happy; their houses are tumbling down, 'pigsties' father calls them—the houses, I mean. Of course a giant can't understand what it's like to live in a pig-sty."

There were Giants in those Days. 243

Jack spoke innocently, his searching gaze riveted upon Sir Charles, his little hands thrust in the pockets of his linen coat.

The giant fidgeted uneasily and pulled at his big moustache, then he turned his eyes away, staring through the open window.

The wonders of an after-glow painted the sky innumerable colours. Sheaths of rays shot up from the vanished sun, but Sir Charles was not looking at the glory.

For the moment his mind travelled back to the old school-days, when he was always in disgrace while his brother Maurice carried off the good-conduct prizes. Maurice, the posêur, the would-be saint, had made for himself the motto: "Thou shalt not be found out," and kept to it with the utmost rigour.

Millicent, adopting the enemy's knee for an arm-chair, leant comfortably against Sir Charles' broad chest.

"It is a pity you are going to take our house away," she said. "You don't know what lovely mud-puddings we make where the tadpoles live! It is right at the end of the garden; the rushes grow all round the pond. We found Moses there. Somebody had thrown him in the water, and he mewed dreadfully. We named him 'Moses' because of the rushes, and it was Sunday, too. Are you friendly with cats? We love them very much. I can't think what Moses will do, because he is very fond of the house, and cats simply can't bear new places. I was wondering if you could leave just a little bit of the yard, enough for a few kittens to live in. Oh, and I do hope you won't come before my birthday; you see,

244 There were Giants in those Days.

we couldn't have a party if we were moving—could we, Jack?"

"No," replied the boy.

"It is a pity," continued Millicent, dangling her sun-burnt legs and heaving a deep sigh. "Jack and I won't ever love another garden quite so much. We heard you had decided to tear everything down, and that is why we expected you to be bigger. You'll have to get some other giants to help you—the trees are very tall."

"Why do you think I want to tear down your home?" he asked, gently.

"Oh! because you are going to ride races," put in Jack. "Mother called it 'a whim,' but father said it was a steeplechase course, and I am sure he knew."

Light broke over the giant's groping senses.

"I see, I see; you live at Hume Cottage, and they have a pretty bad opinion of me there, eh? But it was really rather cruel of you to want to kill me!"

"I did not want to, really, a bit," Jack confessed, half-ashamed of the admission. "I told Millicent I was only doing it for mother's sake; you see, mother cried when she heard you were going to destroy our house. She thinks you will die, because you drink such a lot; she doesn't understand that giants can drink whole rivers!"

Sir Charles for the first time broke into a hearty peal of laughter. The disastrous revelation as to his moral character flowing thus glibly from the tongue of a child amused him by its very falsity.



“ ‘ It was really rather cruel of you to want to kill me.’ ”



There were Giants in those Days. 247

"It is funny, isn't it?" said Jack, joining in the laugh, and mistaking its real significance.

"Aunt Lettice said people were very unkind to jump at—at——what did she call it, Jack?" asked Millicent.

"Conclusions."

"Yes, conclusions," echoed the small voice, and looks of pride were exchanged at mastering the long word.

"Aunt *Lettice*, did you say?" The giant spoke excitedly, sitting bolt upright in his chair, a strange expression lighting his eyes. A moment ago he had been lazily enjoying the slaughter of his own reputation; now he looked both eager and anxious. The children were not slow to notice the change.

"Yes, dear Aunt Lettice, she's so beautiful! We like her best when her hair hangs down at night, then we call her 'Golden Hair,' and Millicent thinks the plaits are fairy ladders. Aunt Lettice came to-day; we were awfully glad!"

"Is her name Lettice Leith?" asked Sir Charles, and his voice trembled. Jack nodded.

There was a pause. The twins stared at him curiously. For the moment he seemed to have forgotten their presence, as he drew a letter from his pocket and re-read its contents.

"I am so sorry at your having to go into the country on business," the letter ran. "It will indeed be dull and boring all alone in that great castle; no wonder the place depresses you. As you have to be away for two or three days I think it would be better to carefully

248 There were Giants in those Days.

guard our secret till your return. Then you must come to dinner, and have a long talk with my 'stern parent'—I am sure you will like him, and I have not the faintest doubt that he will like you! Your wail at being called to Warwickshire would have made me quite sad, but I've thought of a surprise for you (rather a nice surprise, I am conceited enough to tell myself). Prepare for the unexpected, but don't expect too much!"

So Lettice's presence at Hume Cottage must be the surprise! He, then, was her sister's landlord, about to lay low her sister's home, while evil rumour sported with his name.

Sir Charles looked down at his future nephew and niece with a new interest, involuntarily bending to kiss Millicent's hair. In colour and texture it was like Lettice's.

"Come," he said, "I will take you home. Let us go to Aunt Lettice."

"Do you know her?" asked Jack.

The giant smiled. He gave each of the children a hand, and, trotting beside him, they passed out to the dusky garden. The faint rays of glory above were just fading in mist, while the thinnest crescent moon floated between two crimson clouds, like a disembodied spirit.

As they walked towards Hume Cottage he drew them on to talk of Lettice.

"She spoke up for you," said the boy. "I heard her, but I don't think she told mother you were her friend. Of course a person would have to be nice about a friend,



"Somebody opened the garden gate."



There were Giants in those Days. 251

whatever he did, even if he destroyed ever so many houses."

"What did Aunt Lettice say?" asked Sir Charles. Jack thought a moment.

"She called it 'unfair'; she supposed people talked without knowing, and that perhaps you were only thoughtless. Mother mentioned the word 'duty' more than once, but I can't remember all; you see, I was planning to go to the castle myself."

"Yet, after you had found the giant, you let him live! But never mind, old boy, I won't lay a finger on Hume Cottage, in gratitude to you for sparing my life."

"Oh! that *is* good news!" said his young assassin; "only it was really Millicent's doing, because she woke you up."

"Then how am I to repay Millicent?"

The little girl looked up at him with wide, trustful eyes.

"Make the pigsties a little less piggy," she said.

The unselfish request touched him. He patted her on the head.

"All right," he murmured, gazing fondly at the tiny philanthropist; "I daresay Aunt Lettice will help me. I am going to ask her to stay at the Castle. Perhaps she may like it so much she will want to live there altogether."

This seemed a very strange remark, but the children did not like to disbelieve, for the giant had won their respect; they were even getting a little fond of him.

252 There were Giants in those Days.

As they neared Hume Cottage, with its rosebuds closing for the night and languid evening primroses expanding beneath the moon, their companion became strangely silent, hastening his steps till the twins found themselves running to keep pace with him.

Somebody opened the garden-gate and came towards them with a bright smile—a girlish figure clad in white.

The children's hands were suddenly released, and the giant bade them run indoors in a voice they dared not disregard.

With swift steps they bounded up the clematis staircase, seeking their mother breathlessly.

"We've been to the castle," they cried, "but we didn't kill the giant, and he's going to let us stay here, and Aunt Lettice is to see to the poor people's pigsties. Won't that be lovely? And—and—he is outside in the garden with her, because they are great friends. If she likes the castle she is to live in it always."

The twins spoke rapidly—both together, till the stream of words became incoherent, and were only stayed by the welcome sight of nursery tea awaiting the truants' return.

Meanwhile the giant laughed to think he ever called the country "depressing"—as he and Lettice discussed their future in the sweetly-scented garden.

"You told me not to expect too much. I could hardly have expected this," he whispered, drawing her to his arms. "Those children burst upon me in a fairy-tale spirit, and I can still fancy myself treading enchanted

There were Giants in those Days. 253

ground! Perhaps they were purposely sent to teach me my duty; they certainly fulfilled their mission. We will build up the old place together, darling. If I had known you sooner I should have been a better man."

But Lettice did not believe this. In the eyes of love there can exist no "better" for the ideal already enthroned upon a pinnacle of perfection. So the idle moments drifted and became precious.

Jack, peeping out at the starlit garden, whispered as he caught the glimmer of a white dress under the beech tree:—

"Doesn't she look like a fairy princess, Millicent? I believe they are going to 'live happy ever after!'"

"It's very queer, isn't it?" answered Millicent. "I think I should like to marry a giant!"

With this startling assertion she toddled off to bed.







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